

Tori Breen
Teaching Philosophy
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I believe that effective educators teach from a place of honesty, listen to the knowledge of their students, and constantly learn and adapt. In my classes, I aim to teach trust of the body, choice-making, and rigor in intention and physicality. I hope that my students leave class feeling challenged and cared for, and draw pedagogical inspiration from Critical Dance Pedagogy, Culturally Relevant Teaching, and the many teachers I have learned from throughout my life.

I am working toward being an abolitionist teacher, learning from the work of Dr. Bettina Love, who coined the term in 2019, and the organizers of the Abolitionist Teaching Network, formed in 2020 (Stoltzfus, Abolitionist Teaching Network). Love writes about coconspirators as people who go beyond allyship to take real risks for racial justice (Stoltzfus). As a white educator, I commit to organizing within my communities and institutions for racial justice even when doing so destabilizes my job security, my likeability, or my comfort. I will talk about Whiteness and about racism in my classes, connecting these discussions to intergenerational trauma held in the body, embodied performances of racial identity, and elements of white supremacy culture in dance belief systems. I also work to dismantle punitive systems in dance education which are often based on rules that disproportionately police Black, Brown, and Indigenous students' bodies, behaviors, and cultures. I will work to create space for the full range of students' emotions, at all ages, without a goal of changing them or making them more palatable to me as a white teacher. I am challenged to enact abolitionist teaching values in all dance forms and at all ages with developmentally-appropriate methods.

In my classes, I talk about the hard stuff, refusing to dismiss any of the world's injustices as separate from our work in a dance studio. In all areas of education, what we teach and how we teach it should be responsive to the needs of the moment and the social, political, and environmental conversations that are happening around us. With younger children, this looks like asking them to let their feelings influence the way they dance. With older children and adults, this looks like questioning why we do what we do. Why are we taking a dance class? How does dance class fit in to this local, national, or global moment? By responding to external events and cultural shifts, I hope to model ongoing learning and growth and position students to question their roles in their communities beyond the dance studio. My commitment to educating students as whole beings, not just successful and technically proficient dancers, was sparked by environmental educator David Orr. Orr wrote the following in his 1991 essay "What is Education For?": "The plain fact is that the planet does not need more "successful" people. But it does

desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every shape and form.” (Orr) In my dance teaching, I aim to support students in becoming humans who feel equipped to do good in the world.

Students hold knowledge in their bodies and come into my class already knowing so much about dancing. My teaching philosophy is inspired by Culturally Relevant Teaching as described in Nyama McCarthy-Brown’s *Dance Pedagogy for a Diverse World*. (McCarthy-Brown 16) Within Culturally Relevant Teaching, students’ own cultures are seen and celebrated by their teachers (McCarthy-Brown 16). By including course content and using communication styles that are relevant to the lives of my students and by valuing students as experts in their culture’s dance forms, I seek to validate and show love for students in all of their many identities. I also work to diversify my curricula, bringing in guest teachers in forms I am not expert in or sharing videos when hiring guests is not possible. With older children and adults, I incorporate Critical Dance Pedagogy, asking students to interrogate their beliefs about dance and think critically about their experiences in dance classes, including my class (McCarthy-Brown 18).

Four of the many teachers who have shaped my approach to teaching dance are David Dorfman, Dr. Ananya Chatterjea, Marion Spencer, and my father. The first time I took class from David Dorfman, I instantly felt cared for, in large part because of the value he places on knowing his students’ names (David Dorfman Dance). By the end of a single class, he knew the names of 30 or 40 students, and over a period of time I saw him repeat this memorization for dozens more students. When asked about his ability to memorize names, he spoke of the power of hearing a teacher say your name. When he, as a teacher I barely knew, said my name in class, I felt warm, seen, and respected. I am working to find seemingly small practices, like David’s remembering of names, that create a strong sense of care and love in my classes.

Dr. Ananya Chatterjea’s rigorous, justice-centered dance classes are a source of inspiration for my teaching. Ananya pushes her students to confront their perceived physical limitations while simultaneously creating an environment in which students feel they have agency to take care of their bodies. Thanks to clear constructive feedback and affirmations based on power and strength rather than body shape or external beauty, I have felt challenged physically and mentally by Ananya’s classes, but still seen as a human with innate value. Unfortunately, this contrasts with other dance experiences I’ve had, wherein a hard class was linked with being degraded by a teacher. I work to challenge my students without sacrificing any level of kindness or respect.

In any dance class, I find ways to acknowledge the many sources of content I am teaching. I do this both through nuanced class discussion and in-the-moment referencing, identifying a source using “a

la x teacher/dancer/choreographer.” I learned this technique from Marion Spencer, who cites her sources in this way in every contemporary dance class of hers that I have taken (Spencer). Not only does this practice honor movement lineages, it has the added benefit of familiarizing students with other people they can learn from in the future.

Both of my parents are educators and school administrators and have greatly influenced my perspective on education, especially because I grew up at and eventually attended the high school at which they worked. My dad had a more student-facing role at the school during my time as a student, so I more regularly saw his educational philosophies at work. I admire his gentleness and softness that he seems to carry with him whether he is talking to a teenager, a staff member, or the 4-year-old child of a staff member. I work to maintain gentleness in my teaching because I believe that students of all ages benefit from gentleness, and that it is not antithetical to challenge or rigor, but rather is critical to creating cultures of challenge and hard work that do not perpetuate trauma or rely on capitalist models of efficiency. My teaching philosophy is also shaped by my dad’s modeling of awe. Unafraid of expressing his sense of awe at the beauty of a moment, a new viewpoint that changed his mind, or the power of a student’s work, he models the wonder of learning to students without putting on any false excitement. While all teaching is a performance in some ways, I aim to bring honest curiosity and awe to my classes.

Working from these pedagogical values and frameworks, I adapt my teaching style to each class and each individual student. In my early childhood movement classes, I prioritize individual and group play, work on coordination and locomotor and non-locomotor skills, and introduce concepts of personal choice and community need. The importance of each of these focus areas is affirmed in research on movement education by Rae Pica in *Experiences in Movement & Music: Birth to Age Eight* (Pica 10-12, 32, 81, 88). With elementary school-age children, I often center form and improvisation, working with more traditional Western dance class formats while creating ample room for exploration and multiple ways of knowing. With teenage and adult children, I love teaching classes in improvisation, composition, and modern/contemporary technique and tend to shape my class plans around the desires of the students in the room while furthering established learning goals for the course. I love teaching classes where we get sweaty and feel the joys of moving together.

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