TRANSFORMING STUDENTS INTO DANCERS BY INCORPORATING TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE BALLET TECHNIQUE CLASS

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Introduction

Today’s contemporary ballet choreographers have become experts at inventing new ways to twist, enhance, manipulate, and alter the ballet genre through innovative movements. These choreographers consistently prove to us that the art of ballet is bursting onto the stage in new fashion every year. Creative boundaries are expanding to transform the balletic art form and create interest in an art that is often misunderstood and labeled as being stuck in antiquity. However, that antiquity and connection to ballet’s illustrious past makes ballet artists who they are today and frequently becomes the main pulling force for the public as they often perceive ballet to be simply swans drifting across stage or tiny mice slicing the air with decorated swords. It is therefore essential that ballet companies balance the innovative, fresh choreography with a look back to the “good old days” in order to maintain a bookable and hopefully profitable performing season. Thus, ballet companies find themselves balancing on the middle of a tight rope inching their toes forward to ballet’s exciting future of choreographic genius and reaching their hands back to those hands that got them here in the first place.

Is it not interesting, however, that although choreographers constantly push the limits of the creative process, ballet’s pedagogy has stood relatively still, remaining basically the same for centuries? Within ballet pedagogy we are not centrally balanced on that tight rope, but are firmly standing on the starting platform with our hand in a locked handshake of tradition’s past,
often unwilling to let go. In the teaching of ballet, we are not riding that transforming wave of creative genius and forward thinking from which so many of today’s ballet works emerge. Instead, we are strictly sticking to the regiments of yesteryear by standing staunchly in place and saying that this is how ballet has been taught, and must continue to be taught.

The structure and steps of ballet technique have been tested, tried, and proven to produce successful dancers with a strong foundation. This is without question. The great master teachers of past and present are passing on a noble tradition and wealth of knowledge. This is also without question. However, there is the opportunity to match the forward thinking and experimental attitudes of our choreographers with our teachers, so that in the long run the dancers become the greatest beneficiaries. Without changing the body of the classical ballet steps, we can begin to transform the concept of ballet pedagogy and delve into a psychological and pedagogical journey of the teaching of ballet through transformational learning.

There are two types of learning as described by change expert Don Wolfe, informational learning and transformational learning—or head learning and heart learning. As described in the book The One Minute Millionaire, authors Mark Victor Hansen and Robert G. Allen explain that “informational learning is predominant in our educational system. Teachers talk; students listen, take notes, take tests, get grades, and so on. It’s all about memorization and regurgitation. Transformational learning is about empowering students to discover the answers for themselves. It’s a slower process, but much more profound. That’s why it’s transformational.” Hansen and Allen provide in their text an interesting and very informative list differentiating informational learning from transformational learning:
Another explanation of the difference between informational learning and transformational learning is explained by Lisa Baumgartner in “An Update on Transformational Learning.” Baumgartner not only gives her own opinions and conclusions in her article, but also pulls from such transformational learning writers and researchers as R. Kegan and M.C. Clark. Baumgartner says that “much of our learning is additive in nature. We add on to what we already know.” She quotes Kegan who calls this “‘informational learning,’ which refers to
‘extend[ing] already established cognitive capabilities into new terrain.’ This type of learning ‘changes…what we know.’ On the other end of the learning spectrum, Baumgartner explains Clark’s view that “transformational learning, which can occur gradually or from a sudden, powerful experience, changes the way people see themselves and their world.” Therefore, “in sum, while much of the learning that we do in adulthood is adding to what we know there is also the type of learning—transformational learning—that [as Kegan points out] ‘changes…how we know.’

As students come to the university and take ballet classes, I see what they know, but I rarely see evidence of how they know. I see that the majority have been taught from an informational learning approach, that through the traditions passed down from ballet teacher to ballet teacher there has not been as much of a focus, if any, on the transformational side of teaching and learning. This is a problem that I have now been able to label with the differentiation between informational and transformational learning. David Howard said, “Much of [an American’s] training has been acquired in bits and pieces—a little here, a little there—and a lot of it has been based on simply copying what their teacher did. I call it ‘follow the bouncing ball.’ It stops and they stop!”

The students in the upper division university ballet courses are used to following that bouncing ball. They have developed into good, solid technical dancers who can regurgitate anything they have been taught, but the study of ballet, or the education of ballet, has not truly transformed them and become part of them. The emotion, the heart, the trust, and a sense of innate creativity are not inherent in these ballet dancers. Unfortunately, they have had many “Uh-oh!” moments of fear which have taught them to hold back and cage their emotions. To “let go” and feel might be the end for them because they have been taught so firmly that they must
do, and do, and do some more without paying attention to how it internally feels or what emotions could be attached to the movement. Joseph Gale in his text *Behind Barres: The Mystique of Masterly Teaching* interviewed Karel Shook of Dance Theatre of Harlem and this very subject arose. In fact, Karel supports developing this emotional aspect of dance through his own philosophy of teaching. He says that “Emotion and spirit should be fostered first—the way dancers manage their inner feelings and approach to particular movement, rather than their execution of that movement. You just don’t do an arabesque. You become the arabesque.” To connect this to choreography, the choreographer does not want the dancer to only do the part he creates, he wants them to become the part or much is lost in translation and the audience and dancers are not transformed in the process. Therefore, there is a learning and expectation discrepancy between ballet choreography, which requires transformational learning experiences, and the ballet training system that embraces informational learning experiences.

At the university level we have a beautiful opportunity to shift to the column of transformational learning, or at least pull more frequently from its ideas in order to embrace a theory that enhances learning, fosters artistic growth, and encourages personal development. We do not need to continue solely adding to what the students know in our technique classes, but to instead change how they know. This shift is crucial for the students in their process of becoming artists, choreographers, teachers, and life-long learners, as well as for the art of ballet as a whole. If we do not initiate this shift, I believe that the continuance of strictly informational teaching and learning is not going to allow ballet to continue to blossom into the future. The lack of transforming experiences in ballet technique classes will fail to meaningfully support the current, innovative choreography because informational learning alone will only continue to perpetuate mechanical, stifled, stressed, and unexpressive dancers.
Interest in the transformational learning theory is rapidly growing in education, particularly in adult education. For ballet instructors at the university level to take notice would be a large and much needed leap forward in ballet pedagogy. As interest in transformational learning continues to expand, so does the review of literature. The sources on this subject are vast; however, transformational learning has not been specifically applied to ballet or other artistic fields. I feel that this learning theory can be of great benefit to the ballet world as there are such far-reaching possibilities from considering new ways to further the teaching of this beautifully inspiring art form.

As I teach, I continue to see leg extensions reach the ears, I see the number of pirouettes required for an “advanced” student increase, and I see higher jumps and more beats. Yes, I am blessed to work with students that can do all of the tricks, but I want more for them than more of the same. Gabriela Taub-Darvash, a well-known ballet instructor says, “I am not interested in a profession that’s being practiced only to reproduce our five or ten inherited classical ballets—those works in which the corps de ballet actually doesn’t need to do one pirouette….I am interested only in a form of art that develops just like human society develops. I don’t want to teach an art form that is obsolete. I’m interested in teaching dancers to be better than they were 150 years ago.” Teaching dancers to be better than those of the past, as Taub-Darvash mentions, means that we need to become better teachers. We need to be willing to use current learning research to give our dancers what they are missing—new tools and opportunities to transform their thinking, dancing, and overall artistic experience so that we are connecting the arc between ballet technique and choreography, turning it into an artistic loop of creativity and innovation.
I have briefly explained that informational learning is the current system of teaching ballet because we teach the “what.” I see this as an introductory, surface level of teaching that is not servicing our art form or contemporary choreographers well enough. I feel that as we take a look at transformational learning and begin to apply its concepts to our ballet teaching, we are delving deeper into a new, more lasting way of teaching and learning that will ultimately service ballet better as a whole. I believe dancers and choreographers will experience the lessening and hopeful elimination of the current gap of artistic transference from the studio to the stage. However, I do not see the shift from a strictly informational learning setting to one embracing transformation as easy. In ballet, we are steeped in tradition, so to introduce a current educational theory that could be integrated into ballet pedagogical practices is risky because it might disrupt the status quo. But, I am passionate about teaching ballet. My desire is to find ways to help my students embark on a different adventure, to help them transform themselves as dancers and as individuals as they complete their university education at a new level of learning. These students have memorized and performed the necessary ballet steps prior to entering higher education; they have already been taught the what, and so I feel that through this process they will be able to discover the how and become deep thinking and moving artists.

In referring again to Don Wolfe’s action words for informational and transformational learning, I feel that his descriptions of the two types of learning directly connect to the action and artistry of ballet. His categorical descriptions give succinct words that will help us as ballet instructors to easily label the two different types of learning in order that we may incorporate more transformational learning opportunities into our university upper division ballet technique classes.
Throughout the 2005-2006 academic year at Brigham Young University I approached each of these informational and transformational categories within an advanced ballet technique class. My goal was to demonstrate the possibility of learning and experiencing ballet in new ways—to find that often allusive connection between class work and stage presentation. By incorporating transformational learning opportunities and involving each of the students in a variety of ways and methods, I was able to reach this goal as well as discover answers to my action research inquiry. This research inquiry asked the following question: In what ways does implementing transformational learning experiences into traditional informational ballet pedagogy aid the students in reaching higher levels of performance and artistry? By answering this question, my hope was that such a shift from a strict informational teaching pedagogy would not only benefit those involved, but continue to move ballet pedagogy forward without completely abandoning centuries of tradition.

As this is a unique concept and approach to be applied to a ballet technique class, the year long process required willing students, research triangulation, and process documentation to support my theory. The three-pronged documentation includes group and personal interviews, a class work video recording, and a performed choreographic work. For this action research I used a focus group of thirteen students who were enrolled in an upper level ballet technique class and who were also involved in the university’s second or apprentice ballet company. This group of students worked with me three to four times per week in ballet technique class applying the transformational concepts. These same students were also able to continue working on their transformational learning and growth in rehearsals and performances.
After introducing the concept of transformational learning to the students with my theoretical research and ideas, we embarked on an often difficult but rewarding journey. This journey changed the look and feel of the typical ballet technique class for both the students and me. By making the necessary changes to embrace transformational learning, the students were able to discover new things about themselves, the technical side of ballet, and the artistry so desperately needed in the university ballet environment. Through the personal and group interviews, which were conducted at the half way point, the students pinpointed many of the concepts that literally transformed their dancing and helped them to dance at higher levels of artistry, focus, and intent. These concepts that the students identified actually aligned with many of the categorical descriptions outlined in the informational versus transformational learning columns devised by Don Wolfe. I will therefore use the students’ voices to support my theoretical research—that this shift in pedagogy is truly needed in the ballet technique class and that it targets specific areas that will push the dancers to new technical and artistic levels.

As is evident by the action research triangulation of personal interviews, group interviews, and video documentation of class work and a choreographed work, the students experienced the following transformational shifts: from an intellectual and “head” focus to an increased level and investment of emotion and heart; from a structured, serious, and rigid feeling to an increased sense of the creative, curious, and spontaneous; from being told the answers to discovering the answers; and from passive involvement to a state of active involvement. I will approach each category, one word from the informational learning column and the opposite word from the transformational learning column, from a ballet teaching and learning perspective. First, I will explain the pairs of words; second, I will demonstrate how we as ballet teachers can shift more toward the transformational learning column with practical, specific examples; and
third, I will discuss the benefits of this shift in teaching and learning from a pedagogical viewpoint and from a learning perspective, as supported through my observations and the student interviews.

INFORMATIONAL LEARNING VERSUS TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

Intellectual vs. Emotional and Head vs. Heart

Informational learning encompasses the intellectual side, or the head part of learning, while transformational learning is based upon the emotional or heart. We, as ballet instructors, know that our students are intelligent. We know that ballet students do well in the studio and in the traditional classroom, and we always argue that it takes a good amount of brains to be a dancer. Well, this intellectual prowess makes sense when we analyze how we teach ballet—with the intellect as the primary focus. Students are required to learn the combinations quickly and then remember them throughout the entire sequence. They are also required to execute the steps, listen to the teacher give corrections, and correct themselves all simultaneously. It is a balancing act that we pride ourselves on accumulating over time. Most ballet students know what they have to do in each class, because they have intellectually learned to do it. Daloz addresses the intellectual side of informational learning from an interesting vantage point. He expresses that education should “promote development…to imagine otherwise, to act as though learning were simply a matter of stacking facts on top of one another makes as much sense as thinking one can learn a language by memorizing a dictionary.”¹⁰ Are we just stacking the intellectual side of ballet so high that the emotional side is hidden and inaccessible?
Every semester I see a lack of emotion in and from my ballet students. I see students that intellectually dance the steps but are emotionally dead inside, dancing without heart. It is as if they have had the emotion removed from them, as demonstrated by their aloofness and detached expressions. I explain this emptiness of expression and emotion to them as a two-dimensional versus three-dimensional concept. When the students dance with a lack of emotion or heart I label this as two-dimensional—it is as if I could wave my hand in front of their faces and they would not even blink. They dance as flat, inanimate objects rather than well-rounded individuals who are full of life. A three-dimensional dancer dances as a real person—one that has feelings and emotions and who can express this through his or her technique. I relate to what Alexander Ursuliak says of his students, “In spite of my madness…they’ve remained quite natural this year—a normal bunch of young people developing their abilities, but also developing as human beings at the same time. As soon as they start moving, you feel this humanness about them…it’s not just feet and arms, which, of course, we talk about in class, but the priority is first the person. The other things are simply there to get us from point A to point B.”

Too often I see the opposite, the actual removal of emotions by teachers as they demand glazed, obedient students because getting from point A to point B is more important than who the student becomes. In the teacher’s mindset the student is there to be manipulated, arranged, and disciplined, without a tear ever falling. By swallowing hard to make their tears disappear, the students also learn to swallow their emotions, feelings, and inner strength resulting in a hardened exterior that is difficult to crack. The result is the propagation of the two-dimensional dancer—the complete opposite of what we need for choreography. If the students have not had transformational learning experiences that encourage them to access their personal emotions through ballet, thus promoting three-dimensional development, they are missing one of the biggest pieces in
performing choreography—that of being able to communicate something. Without this communication of emotion the chasm from class to stage expands. Maria Fay supports this two-dimensional/three dimensional concept when she says, “Considering that artists need to develop great sensitivity and intensity of feelings it seems that to anaesthetize a dancer’s emotional life may result in more and more robot-like performers instead of susceptible, refined artists.”

Ways to foster the emotional expression and heart of the students in a ballet technique class are individual and would be based on the teacher’s experience and the students in class; however, I include a few suggestions. Through this transformational research process I have discovered that movement improvisation really brings out a student’s inner emotion and heart. Improvisation is something that is done in the genre of modern dance quite regularly, but rarely in a ballet technique class, especially using the steps and technique of the ballet discipline. When the concept was introduced to my focus group, one of the students commented, “Oh no! Another modern class!” and another student in the group interview said that her first thought was “Why are we doing this in ballet?”

There are many ways to incorporate improvisation into a ballet class, a few of which include: having the students improvise the entire combination; setting the first or last part of a combination and having the students contribute the other half; or giving parts of a combination and then within that combination have the students interject their own movement. Ballet improvisation gives the students the freedom to explore the possible emotions of ballet by investing their heart and feelings into their chosen movements. However, improvisation and this emotional exploration require much trust between the teacher and the students. Meg Williams, in her personal interview, pointed out that “At first I felt trapped because I couldn’t venture outside of my comfort zone…definitely a level of trust had to be established, and once I felt that
that was established, I felt a lot freer and that there was a lot more room to grow in my dancing.” This trust gives the students the license to let themselves go and delve personally into their own movement, thus connecting right to their heart and emotions—a must for choreography and performance. Improvisation also gives the students “movement ownership” where they are able to make the movement in class their own—whether it is set material or their own contributions. This also increases emotional and heart involvement because the students are dancing to express their own individuality rather than trying to stuff themselves into the classical ballet mold. Also, through improvisation the students are able to see how emotion and feelings can be portrayed in so many ways as they watch their fellow dance students express themselves individually and uniquely.

A second means of encouraging the transformational aspect of emotion or heart in a ballet technique class is through the merging of specific emotions with movements or combinations. In order to learn to perform in technique class, this way of approaching movement is extremely beneficial to the students. In my focus group I set a combination, either at center or at barre, and we would decide as a class what type of emotion to unite with the given steps. We explored all types of emotions with that same combination and it was incredible to not only see the results come out of the students, but to experience the feeling in the studio. The emotion, feeling, and energy in the atmosphere changed dramatically as the students explored their abilities to portray emotions through movement. Megan McMahon said, “When we did emotion with something, I performed so much more when I had a reason to do it—it gave me motivation to perform in class.” A dancer in the group interview commented, “The neatest thing was taking the idea of dancing a combination with different feelings and different than you normally would and applying it to the stage. It helped me to find for myself the way I wanted to
dance a certain piece of choreography—my performance got that much better because the two were combined in class.” This exercise, with all its various possibilities, fosters the connection of heart and body through expressive movement.

Third, the focus on the breath of a movement can increase a student’s overall expression, emotion, and heart while dancing in technique class and on stage. If the student is initiating every movement with breath, he or she will naturally express and involve his or her heart because it requires full commitment to the movement. In looking at the connection of breath to the heart, it interesting to note that there is physiological evidence linking the two other than the fact that oxygenated blood is needed to survive. When a baby is born there is literally a change in the heart, or a change of heart as it is often called, when the first breath is taken. Elisabet O. Orville in her internet course Fetus to Newborn: The Perinatal Period explains this by saying, “What happens at birth? As soon as the neonate draws its first breath and the cord is cut, pulmonary blood flow increases by two hundred percent (Crelin, 1973) and the pressure of the blood returning from the lungs to the left atrium closes the valve of the foramen ovale.”

With that first breath the heart instantaneously closes off and begins to function as it will for the rest of our lives. So, if the heart can physically change with a breath, dancing can also physically change with a breath and result in a new sense of artistry, expression, and flow. Breathing life into a student’s dancing through incorporating this emphasis or objective in technique class will encourage expression, emotion, and heart to naturally follow suit.

Fourth, a focus on feeling the movement with the entire body, rather than just doing it, can shift the emphasis from intellectual and mechanical to a place where emotional expression is enhanced and heart-felt dancing is ensured. This focus allows for “dancing” to enter the ballet technique class. Jeff Slayton, a modern dancer and educator, “finds many students think
technique is separate from dancing, so he tells them, ‘Technique is something to free you to
dance rather than hold you back.’ He also stresses the importance of involving the entire body.
When students are doing a foot exercise, for example, they should be ‘aware of what the top of
the body is doing, that it is still but it’s dancing. It’s alive!’”18 In technique class, the focus
group experimented with superficially doing a step or movement and then changing the focus,
energy, and emotion by engaging the entire body. When students involve the whole body in the
technique, whether that be in a tendu or pirouette combination, they “feel” it, which is crucial for
a blending of technique and performing. Katherine Shepherd supported this in her interview
when she said that because of these transformational experiences “I can feel how it really
looks.”19 Megan McMahon said, “I felt a lot of progression in myself from changing from
doing steps to dancing it.”20 A student in the group interview added, “This can be the means by
which one finds the expression and feeling within the technique.”21 Mekelle Johnson said, “I
learned how to feel the movement rather than just focusing on the steps and technique.”22 When
using the entire body to dance, a teacher can also encourage different facial expressions at
different times as well as help the students to use their eyes to show that the movement is coming
from within. These suggestions will aid in shifting the focus from an intellectual or head
emphasis to an emotional and heart one, making the dancing come alive.

The final suggestion I have for this category is an exercise where I turn out the lights and
have the students dance the combination for their own benefit and enjoyment. I remain silent
throughout this exercise so that they understand that they are free to express and dance as they
would if no one else were in the room. This gives the students a sense of autonomy and a license
to open their heart and soul with abandon. Bethany Romney commented that this “helps you feel
what kind of dancer you are and what you like to do and by expressing yourself in class more,
you’ll naturally express more on stage.” If the students are able to do this exercise with the lights out in the studio, eventually they will have the necessary confidence in their abilities to dance this same way with the stage lights shining brightly.

By incorporating these transformational learning ideas into a ballet technique class the students experienced an increase in the heart and emotion of their dancing. The following are some of the students’ comments from both the group and individual interviews, demonstrating the benefits they felt:

“You learn to dance everything instead of just doing the steps”

“I thought it helped with expression because I am usually expressive on stage, but not so much in class—so, as a result I was more expressive through class and even more expressive on stage.”

“I am beginning to see this—I’m at a point where the technique is in my body and we just need to be able to rely on that and know that we know it and when we can do that we can add in the performance quality and it combines a lot easier.”

“If transformational learning was incorporated throughout training then technique, expression, and performance would all be increased.”

“I really don’t express if the teacher doesn’t help me to find those moments—I just do the steps and get into that groove. Doing this helped me to remember to think of expression so there isn’t as much of a void between class and stage performance.”

“It helped me to look past technique and what I do in every day class and just dance.”

As can be seen, helping students to develop the emotional side of their dancing so that they can portray heart-felt feelings has far reaching benefits. They are less inhibited, they develop mature artistry more quickly, and they become real and relatable rather than removed
and untouchable. Their movements begin to flow naturally because it is an extension of how they feel—it is a process of working inside out rather than outside in. By working this way in technique class, the students are immediately able to find personal expression for choreography because it is a part of their dancing, as well as part of them. Through this exploration, a student finds the joy in dancing, discovering that ballet can be a true expression of one’s self. One of the ultimate benefits from shifting to the transformational learning qualities of emotion and heart is that the students experience a “qualitative change in…seeing, experiencing, understanding, [and] conceptualizing” rather than only experiencing the intellectual side which results in a “quantitative change in the amount of knowledge someone possesses.” This qualitative change moves these students easily and successfully forward into artistically enriching performance and choreographic dimensions.

**Structured vs. Creative, Serious vs. Curious, and Rigid vs. Spontaneous**

I believe that these three pairs of words relate directly to one another. The current ballet technique classroom is deeply trenched in the informational learning qualities of structured, serious, and rigid. We have carried on this often immobilizing environment in the name of discipline. We lack the environmental freedom in the ballet class to be curious or spontaneous because we are rule-bound to tradition. As Weimer expresses, “our classrooms are now rule-bound economies that set the parameters and conditions for virtually everything that happens there.”

This informational setting, that we as teachers promote, may be a detriment in the long run for the actual learning process of ballet and cause dependence and weakening of our students as independent artists. Interestingly, Weimer points out that “the more structured we make the
environment, the more structure students need. The more we decide for our students [which is everything in ballet], the more they expect us to decide. The more motivation we provide, the less they find within themselves. The more responsibility for learning we try to assume, the less they accept on their own. The more control we exert, the more restive their response. We end up with students who have little commitment to and almost no respect for learning and who cannot function without structure and imposed control.”

I propose to incorporate the transformational learning aspects of creativity, curiosity and spontaneity into the ballet technique class. If we do so we will begin to help our students learn in a way in which they will take responsibility for their own learning and motivation. It is imperative that we help students to develop in ways which result in a respect for learning where they are no longer spoon-fed, but instead can function on their own without the dominating, stifling, unnecessary, and often over-bearing structure that looms in the ballet class. Maria Fay asks a worthwhile question, supporting the need for a shift in the ballet pedagogical learning approach, “How can we expect more quality, sensitivity, imagination, and creativity—the real criteria for artistry—in an art form where so many of the artists who create it have to build on submission, frustration, unhappiness and cynical compromise as a foundation for their professional activity?!“

As I interviewed the students in the focus group for this action research project they commented many times on the structure found in the ballet class. One student said, “Ballet is structured—I didn’t think of the possibilities, it’s hard to branch out, and we don’t naturally explore the boundaries of ballet—you know what comes next.” Another comment was, “Ballet is more confined to certain combinations, limited freedom—I feel things have to be a certain way.” This tradition of maintaining structure in a ballet technique class at any cost results in
students who often feel “worried about right and wrong, worried about expectations, and worried about what step should come next.” There are also many who constantly feel self-conscious, timid, overwhelmed, fearful, and hesitant. Most students feel nervous about trying a new learning process within the ballet class because they have previously shifted all of the responsibility to the teacher for their instruction and growth. In fact, they do not know how to approach ballet from their own perspective or experience. So, the comment that Weimer makes above holds true in the ballet setting because we are aiding in the development of students “who cannot function without structure and imposed control.”30 We continue to propagate the tradition of a system that hails structure, seriousness, and rigidity as the way to maintain discipline and develop competent dancers. We need to stop this cycle or at least offer other alternatives for the future of ballet artists. We need to realize that “by the nature of our work we are responsible to a greater degree for the mentality of both dancers and dance-makers. If we operate with myopic and despotic attitudes and rely on preconceived ideas, we shouldn’t be surprised if those dancers whom we have taught in such a manner will behave in similar ways when they reach positions where they are in charge of new dancers’ careers and, what’s more, they also hold the future progress of the dancing profession in their hands.”31

In order to change these preconceived notions and the propagation of how ballet has to be, we need to creatively, curiously, and spontaneously explore the boundaries of ballet technique. We as ballet teachers, particularly in the university setting, have the opportunity to be part of the development of self-thinking, independent artists. Through transformational learning activities we can shift students to a new place where they are less externally controlled and more internally motivated.
There are ways to give students some control in their learning which ignites that spark of curiosity and spontaneity in the ballet class. As is the case in the previous informational versus transformational category where improvisation is utilized, the ballet teacher can also allow for more improvisation within this category. Improvisation not only gives the students the opportunity to explore their heartfelt emotions, but it also offers a look into a student’s level of creativity. The methods of improvisation that I suggest in the previous section can also be used to foster creativity. The focus just needs to be altered so that the students know the objective and can work towards that. By using improvisation with a creative objective, the students discover their personal movement style. This adds spontaneity and motivation to the ballet class and aids in developing the creativity much needed in performing or choreographing creative works.

Within the group of ballet majors at Brigham Young University there is a great need for this exploration. Many students enter their final year at the university and are required to do a senior choreographic project. This becomes a problem as they have had no experience with exploring their personal balletic style. They lack experience with and knowledge of the movements and patterns that provide the base for choreography. This puts them at a disadvantage, trying to draw water from a dry well or simply copying and pasting what others before them have done. Through improvisation the students can discover their “voice” within the ballet genre and feel comfortable with choreography. In fact, one of the students in my focus group noted how “important [it was] for all dancers to experience their own movement to prepare for choreography and the rest of their career.” Laura Pettit, another student, said that this would “be helpful for future choreography.” That Laura would now, after going through this transformational learning experience, feel comfortable being more creative rather than “just
creating some cutesy, classical something, but really spending time choreographing something meaningful.”

Although the students were hesitant and timid at first, and not even completely comfortable by the end of the year, there was an underlying excitement for the implementation of improvisation in order to foster creativity. Michelle Flores said it was “great to branch out of the little ‘this is how class goes in ballet’ kind of mindset.” In technique class we used improvisation to push beyond the boundaries of ballet so that the students could discover the freedom within the ballet technique. Megan McMahon gained an “insight into the freedom in ballet. I didn’t have choreographing experiences in ballet and I didn’t think I’d be able to, but I realized that there is so much you can do.” Stephanie Haymore commented, “I’ve been able to think of ballet in broader terms and see more possibilities even in classical ballet. I’m able to see where things could be expanded upon and how much more depth there is to ballet from what is thought.” And, a student in the group interview said she was “surprised by how much freedom can be found within the ballet technique—how improvisation can be done using ballet steps.”

After the students had experienced several months of creativity-building exercises within the ballet class, most of them felt that they could still tap into a greater well of creativity. They felt that they had not pushed their own personal boundaries within the ballet technique quite enough. Jana Burleson said she would “try to be more diverse in what I do—I would think of new ways and would like to work on how I vary tempo/music and different styles.” Laura Pettit said that she was holding back on being really creative, but she branched out further toward the end from what she did at the beginning of the semester. She concluded that she would “push myself to be more creative.” Megan McMahon added, “I would push myself farther—often times I did what was safe in that combination.” How exciting it has been to see
how a creative improvisational approach has opened these students up to new and varied possibilities, giving them valuable insights into their own and others’ levels of creativity, and instilled in them a sense of personal ownership and motivation. It has helped to literally transform their technique into dancing and move the ballet studio closer to the stage.

Another possibility to add creativity and spontaneity into the technique class would be to have the students make creative or spontaneous choices throughout the barre and center exercises. For example: the students could run to different places at barre or in center during or at the end of combinations; they could create transition steps to change sides; they could choose their own stretches at the end of combinations; they could decide on what balances would benefit them the most after certain exercises; they could choose their own stretch program for a particular week; they could choose to implement various pirouette options within a combination, depending on their need; and they could choose their own port de bras throughout a specific exercise. The students in the focus group enjoyed applying their own port de bras to regular en dehors pirouettes to discover balance, placement, and energy. Through these choices, that normally are not offered in strict informational ballet pedagogy, the students are able to design their own class in many respects. They are able to be as creative or spontaneous as they would like and they can satisfy a sense of curiosity by trying new and unique things. There are a tremendous number of possibilities to develop creativity and spontaneity, and as one student said, “I liked how it wasn’t the same every time—it kept you on your toes.”

One well-known ballet methodology that has limitedly explored some of the creative and spontaneous possibilities within ballet technique is the Royal Academy of Dancing (RAD). Throughout this methodology’s levels there are instances where what is called “free movement” is incorporated into the ballet technique class. To build students’ creativity and spontaneity
RAD occasionally implements free use of arms, traveling to different places in the studio, or executing a free spin within a combination. However, I found from reviewing these syllabi, that this “free movement” is not only limited, but held to only one movement or just a few counts. I feel this is a valid beginning for young students, but that university students need a more active environment with greater allowances in order to enhance their levels of personal creativity and spontaneity.

As we continue to look at spontaneity in the technique class, several things can be added that keep the students “on their toes.” Several times I asked for a specific student to randomly create a new combination on the spot that contained certain technical or stylistic elements. Bethany Romney was one such student from whom I requested this and in her interview she said, “I came up with it easily and did things I liked to do. It was so fun because the class enjoyed the combination. As a result I felt good about my dancing and my performance for the class.”

Kate Griffith felt that even more spontaneous combination assignments should be made—she loved doing an on-the-spot pettit allegro for the class. Also, we explored more of this approach by having different individuals contribute a particular number of counts to design an entire combination. This was enlightening for all as the students were able to be creatively spontaneous and gain confidence from these experiences. On some occasions, to vary things slightly, I had the students give me four steps that they would like to include in a particular combination and then I created the combination spontaneously. They enjoyed this exercise because they were involved in the creation of that combination, thus increasing their excitement and motivation to perform it fully. A teacher could also mix traditional or original choreographic sequences into the classical technique combinations to give the class a change of pace and focus. This changes the rigidity of a typical ballet class into a fun opportunity to explore various
movements and styles—aiming toward the end goal of connecting technique with choreography. Finally, the teacher could assign various stylistic flairs to classical technique combinations in order to bring out different flavors of movement and highlight the different personalities of the students.

To further develop spontaneity, the students could be asked to face different parts of the room at various points in a combination as they are performing it. This increases the students’ reaction times and adds a thrill to technique class because they never know what is coming next. The students could also be asked to add something new to the combination as they dance it. They could add several counts of their own, an improvisation section, or a hold or balance to see if they are really aligned and securely on their standing leg. Also, the students’ foci could be changed in the process of dancing a combination and various arms, or port de bras, could be inserted to give the combination a life of its own. All of these suggestions give an added sense of creativity, curiosity, and spontaneity so that the students are completely involved, listening, and fully participating with all of their minds, bodies, and spirits.

The following are further insights from both the group and personal interviews that demonstrate more of the students’ feelings and thoughts concerning the increase in creativity, curiosity, and spontaneity in the ballet technique class:

“I was most surprised by how much I loved watching everyone else and see everyone doing their own thing but staying within the technique of ballet—there were so many steps and movements, it was beautiful.”

“I wished I had started doing this when I was younger because I had been trained structured and classical and it would have helped me more in other areas of dance.”
“I liked the creativity in modern and freedom and I always wished there was a class that put the two together with the technique of ballet.”

“With keeping the technique and doing transformational learning, it would help them to progress and have the desire to do ballet.”

“I was able to find different styles. I tend to dance the same way for every combination and it helped me to at least notice that things could be different—that it didn’t have to be the same style.”

“It opened me up to new ways of looking at ballet and seeing the benefits of being able to use improvisation in my dancing because at first I thought it was absolutely silly, but now I can see the benefits and how it helps.”

In the future “I would add more and try anything different—that helps you grow and you never know what a choreographer is going to throw at you and if you have all the different movements you can do and you’ve experimented with them already, it will help you feel more comfortable.”

“It helped me a lot. It helped in teaching because it gave me more flexibility—it was easy for me to come up with combinations on the spot.”

The benefits to incorporating more creative, curious, and spontaneous learning opportunities are: that motivation remains high and comes from within the students; that the exposure to different ways of learning ballet helps the students to be more versatile in approaching other dance genres; that it assists students to develop an individual artistic style that will carry directly over to performance and choreographic opportunities because more personality shines through their dancing; that it encourages the students creatively to generate new movement; that it aids the students in becoming more autonomous learners rather than
reliant upon authority figures to spoon-feed them; and that it puts ballet students out of their comfort zone, which facilitates the learning and performing of contemporary ballet choreography.

**Told the Answer vs. Discover the Answer**

In the structured, serious, and rigid environment of the ballet technique class, which was discussed in the last section, it is logical that the teacher tells the answers to the students—being that informational learning is the method of choice. The students are told the answer because it is the transferring of information that is important, rather than how or if the students are learning. When the students are only the subjects, rather than the participants in the transferring of information they “depend on the teacher to identify what needs to be learned, to prescribe the learning methods, and finally to assess what and how well they have learned.”45 This is typical in a ballet class and it has been this way for centuries—the students are to sit back and soak in all of the information given by the teacher so that they can hopefully become skilled in this challenging art form.

Flachmann addresses this phenomenon from an educational standpoint in Weimer’s text Learner-Centered Teaching. She says, “I’m a little embarrassed to tell you that I used to want credit for having all the intelligent insights in my classroom. I worked hard to learn these facts…I secretly wanted my students to look at me with reverence. I now believe that the opposite effect should occur—that the oracle, the locus and ownership of knowledge should reside in each student and our principal goal as teachers must be to help our students discover the most important and enduring answers to life’s problems within themselves. Only then can they truly possess the knowledge that we are paid to teach them.” 46
Are we guilty of telling all of the answers because we want the credit? I believe that many ballet teachers are still “performing” in their teaching careers and they do want the recognition and credit that they believe years of work owes them—I know that I have been guilty of this fact. But, how much more valuable is it for the students to discover the answers on their own as Flachmann suggests? If they are simply asked, this personal journey of discovery can begin! Why do we do this step? How does that feel? What connections can be made to such and such? Why does this work and that does not? Why did you choose the steps that you did? How does this connect to your performance? Allowing students to participate more fully throughout class helps them to process information in a way that allows for personal and collective discoveries. Donna Tileston shifted her teaching focus from one of telling the answers to having the students discover the answers and found extreme benefits. She says, “We quit teaching as if we were the all-knowing scribes and made the students active participants in the learning: We created real-world applications to the learning and we told students up front what the learning had to do with their world. We encouraged creativity, connections to the learning and reflective thinking. We created a place where learning was respected and nourished—and we all thrived.”

Ballet students love to discover the answers and become better at ballet—that is why they are in class. David Howard said, “Remember, if you’re having trouble with students, it’s not that they don’t want to get better. They all want to get better. It’s just that we as teachers haven’t found a way to help them do it.” Discovering the answers will not only transform the students’ learning, but it also becomes an exercise for ballet instructors in self-discovery. Are we really teaching the students what we think we are? This is a good way to find out.
Judith Gray supports this need for the students to discover their own answers. She says, “…when the class consists of an equal interchange of ideas and decisions, the interactive mode is present. This is the most dynamic of the modes and tends to lead to the greatest levels of creativity, achievement, and satisfaction.”\textsuperscript{49} I believe that all ballet teachers would love this kind of stimulating atmosphere in their classes. Giving the students ownership in their learning will give them ownership on stage. They will have the confidence to discover the needed choreographic answers that will be required of them in all ballet choreography, classical or contemporary. Instead of being told what they have to do to make a choreographic piece convey a certain concept, they will have the experiences from class from which to draw, thereby discovering their personal contribution to the work.

The shift from informationally telling the answers to transformationally discovering the answers was a difficult transition for the research focus group. When interviewed, almost all of the students made the comment that at first they just wanted to be “told what to do”—that they liked the “control to be in other people’s hands.” This makes sense because that was where they were coming from—an environment where most of the communication consists of someone telling someone else what to do, when to do it, and how it should be done. However, by the end of the year the overall attitude toward this learning collaboration between me and the students changed greatly. Jana Burleson commented, “I felt like the teacher cared—she didn’t just tell us what to do—everyone was working together to have a technique class and I got so much more out of it than just regurgitating.”\textsuperscript{50} Katherine Shepherd also felt that this transformational shift made her feel that I cared about them, that I wanted to see what they could come up with. She continued this thought with, “…having that control in class was something I had never had before because a teacher puts it on a plate for us and says ‘this is what you do.’ And so having
more control of what I wanted to do helped me to realize that I could be creative and that I didn’t have to just listen to what someone was telling me to do.”

In our informational ballet setting of always being told what to do, students can unfortunately be hindered in the long run as it could be considered the easy way out for several reasons. First, there is very little personal investment involving the heart, mind, and body—the students do not really have to put themselves outside of their comfort zone and take risks. They are able to hide in their bodies and minds during technique class and lose or not even develop the heart of the art of ballet. In fact, the students can be removed and uninvolved even though they are physically moving and doing what is asked. Second, the fact that we are always telling the answers can be hindering to future artists because there is little or no mental preparation needed for the student to be in class—he or she just needs to show up. The students are not assigned homework or any thought-provoking assignments prior to class so they come ready to be spoon-fed all of the answers without any requirement to think beyond what is given or asked of them. Third, the student lives within the teacher’s world and gains only the teacher’s perspectives. This impedes the student because he or she is not given the opportunity to develop and experience his or her own world in technique class and have the added bonus of it being enriched and enhanced by the teacher’s knowledge and experience or that of other students. And fourth, in this tell and do environment the students must give up their personal control which results in a loss of personal responsibility. They lose a sense of being pro-active with their technique or their careers which can result in the eventual fading of or misdirection in future artistic possibilities.

To avoid these negative outcomes from a “told the answer” pedagogical approach there are several things that can be changed in the ballet technique class. First, students need to be
able to have a voice and find their voice. This would mean more than just speaking with their bodies, but they also need the opportunity to verbalize throughout the class so that discoveries are shared and artists are developed. As students are invited to voice their needs, adjustments in class can be made by the instructor. This helps the students to see that the instructor cares about what the students think and that the instructor is not strictly stuck to his or her own objectives. This requires flexibility in the students and the instructor to make it successful. Also, I think it is crucial that the teacher asks questions and the students vocalize their insights or observations about themselves and the group. Through questions the teacher can also guide student selections to discover ways of moving and connecting that are more challenging and less comfortable.

Many ballet teachers do not ask any questions and do not allow for any questions to be asked—this silences the student in more ways than in just his or her vocal cords. A lack of time becomes an issue if too many questions are asked, but I feel that this is such an important part of the learning process that something else can acquiesce in order for real, lasting student discoveries to surface.

Another way to give the students a voice in technique class is to have them list what they would like to work on that particular semester or term as a group. When the focus group did this they felt very invested and involved in the discovering of what they needed to do to further their technique and artistry. Interestingly enough, one of the things that the students wanted to work on was “putting it all together.” This meant that they wished to combine the technique, the artistry, the quality, and the heart into one after they had discovered each of these individually through transformational learning. Additionally, I thought it was fascinating that everything they put on that list were things that I knew they needed to work on and planned to work on anyway. However, giving the students this opportunity to voice their desires truly increased their
motivation and focus throughout the semester and the year. As I would give certain combinations or have them create their own, we would incorporate items from their list so that they knew that their technical and stylistic requests were not forgotten.

And, a final way to give students the opportunity to let their voices be heard is by having them analyze given movements and movements of their choice out loud. This helps them to hear their own thinking which is very important for learning assessment, application, and processing. This could be done directly in technique class, during a separate evaluation session, or in a five to ten minute discussion period once per week or more often depending on schedules.

Another activity that aids the students in developing the transformational category of “discovering the answers” is in utilizing partnerships and small groups. Many teachers use partnerships in a variety of successful ways in a ballet technique class. This approach is a wonderful means by which students can learn trust in others, the ability to open up and share, the discovering of their levels of creativity, and the opportunity to fine tune their abilities in working with others. The following suggestions were experimented with in the research focus group while dealing with this concept: first, have the students teach certain concepts (assigned or chosen, technical or artistic) within a small group and have them perform them for the class; second, have the students make up their own combination and perform it themselves and then swap their combination for their partner’s, so that each are experiencing different technical and artistic possibilities; and third, have partners correct each other on a certain step or for a particular combination. Something that I also incorporated in technique class this last semester was having pairs of students videotape one another—one videotaping their partner one day and the next day they switched roles. Typically I video the entire class at once each semester, but this assessment procedure offered a unique perspective by having the camera constantly record
one dancer throughout the entire class. One of my fellow faculty members, Marsha Russell, let me borrow this concept. It was extremely beneficial for the students as they were able to work together and learn from one another as well as individually meet with me for conferences following the videotaped classes. Throughout all of these partner/small group experiences it is crucial that the students communicate with each other on what is strong in their performances and what needs work. This provides immediate feedback for the students and helps with a much needed paradigm shift from student to teacher for additional technical and artistic discoveries.

The third activity that can enhance transformational learning is to have the student directly engaged in the creative process. In the creativity section I discuss this briefly, but I would like to add additional thoughts and examples that help the students to discover their own answers—answers to such things as personal strengths and weaknesses, what works and what does not, how to push themselves technically and artistically, and how to discover how hardworking they are as individuals. The following are suggestions executed with the research group and proved successful. First, have the students create their own combination for a particular exercise, remember that combination for the second side, and then add to it and change it in order to develop it throughout the week. Second, have them add movements to partially set combinations that they need to work on, or have them add movements to other combinations that they enjoy and do well. Third, have the students design an assigned combination at the beginning of class after informing them of the objective for that week. Fourth, have them decide on the objective for any particular week. And fifth, have the students identify the class objective after performing several barre combinations, so that they are discovering for themselves the focus of study.
The students in the focus group made the following comments concerning their experiences in discovering the answers for themselves:

“I wish I had done this earlier—as a ballerina you’re always told how to move, what to do, what’s next and I’m lost when thinking creatively and finding things on my own.”

“It helps us to discover ourselves.”

“You had no choice, but you had to dance instead of just doing what you’re told. It helped me to enjoy combinations I may not love doing.”

“I could have control in how the class was going.”

“I felt I had something to contribute—I felt stronger and more confident.”

“It made us appreciate the individuality as dancers—it’s important to find what’s beautiful in yourself and that’s what makes you perform and create. You have to appreciate that.”

“I would have a focus to work on specific things instead of just doing something pretty.”

“I would try to open up more and close off the whole studio, the classmates, and teachers and use it for myself and…my own knowledge and understanding.”

“As time went on I started doing stuff in center that I wanted to do, that I felt like I needed to work on, so then I started doing stuff that was hard for me. That was good because there was less pressure because [the teacher] wasn’t criticizing what I was doing so much so I could really try for it and go for it instead of just hoping that I made it and holding back to just be on the safe side.”

“I learned trust within myself that I know how to dance and I don’t need somebody telling me all the time what to do and what’s wrong and what’s right.”52
The benefits to discovering the answers are: an increase in class energy that may have been previously lacking because the students become the primary players, rather than secondary, in the learning process; that the students have ownership in their technique and can continue to build on that in the future; that ballet technique can be looked at from many different angles (or opinions) in partnerships, small groups or with the entire class, resulting in an interesting study of movement and artistry; that the students develop increased confidence which results in proactive dancers; that the students increase their level of ability by taking personal risks, knowing that the teacher is a facilitator rather than a know-it-all judge; that the students have to reflect more on their technique which will benefit them as dancers, teachers, and choreographers; that the students gain strength from the fact that they have a voice and something to communicate in their new found participatory role; that they gain valuable personal knowledge and understanding; and, that ballet becomes a living process of experience rather than a product of layered information from antiquity.

**Passive Involvement vs. Active Involvement**

Students are in class to be taught and teachers are in class to teach—that is the ideology to which many of us in the ballet world steadfastly hold. When students are passively involved, as in this ideology, they are not learning as much as they could. Passive involvement alludes to a teacher-centered informational learning focus, while active involvement directly relates to a learner-centered transformational focus. In a passive learning situation the teacher is the authoritative figure, while in a more active learning situation the teacher is in a facilitative role.

As we consider a shift to transformational learning approaches, the facilitative role appears often in the educational research because it is with this role that teachers affect students’
learning most dramatically. Weimer states, “True facilitative roles do not offer as much personal performance thrill, but they do hold for teachers the promise of more intimate, obvious, and essential involvement with students’ learning. We can take, and students are much more likely to give credit for what made learning possible. They learned because of us, not in spite of us.”

As the teacher steps into a facilitative role the classroom certainly becomes a more enriched learning environment. However, as Tileston points out, “It isn’t enough for students to be in an enriched environment, they need to help create that environment and be active in it.”

All of the transformational categories addressed in this action research require the students to be actively involved and have a role in creating their environment. This is what is so challenging in looking at the shift from informational pedagogical approaches to transformational ones for a ballet technique class. A typical ballet environment is teacher-centered and only in a learner-centered, active environment can the students truly transform themselves. This is because true transformation occurs as one is part of the process and part of the decision making in a collaborative atmosphere with the end goal of developing self-thinking, capable, and versatile artists.

Even though it is possible to create such a collaborative atmosphere and approach, as demonstrated by my research, I feel that this is a very difficult thing to consider and act upon because most ballet teachers would gulp with the impossibility of such a possibility! One might argue that students in dance classes are always in an active involvement role because it is by nature an activity class. But, by looking at the structure of the ballet class and the authoritative role the teacher plays, one can immediately see that the students are actively moving but only passively contributing to the overall environment of the class. This passiveness causes problems such as a lack of confidence and independence. Maria Fay addresses this when she says, “Being
brought up in a vocational school not to act or think for themselves they lack the confidence and independence.” If students become active in the design of the ballet class they can then develop this much needed confidence and independence. With a learner-centered environment students will not be passively pushed into the wall, but instead be able to stand center with poise, purpose, and a sense of thrill at the many possibilities ahead of them.

I am not saying that the authoritative teacher with the student under his or her thumb in a passive state is not effective. Ballet teachers have done this for centuries. However, I believe that the art form is being stifled because students are losing the opportunity for a type of active learning that will transform them into artists. Ballet teachers need to give their students a real role in the process so that what they do in the technique class can have a direct impact on their artistic performances on stage. If this occurs, we can continue to close the chasm that separates the technicians and the artists, the what and the how.

In all of the informational versus transformational categories that have been discussed, I have pushed ballet pedagogy toward the active learning end of the spectrum so that the students know how to shape themselves as artists rather than being pedagogically swallowed by the what of ballet. This is the key to the transformative effect that will open up ballet to future generations in new and exciting ways. As artistic and personal changes are experienced by ballet students, ballet will continue to move forward and develop as a living, viable art form. But, this needs to be done through actively involving the students on many levels so that the art form lives within the students. It makes ballet exciting and personal when the students are directly involved in the learning process. In Michelle Flores’ personal interview she addressed this when she said, “I think it’s good to be actively involved—in ballet we typically aren’t so this is good to be part of the learning process.”
This active learning process yielded positive outcomes and results for the students with one of the most powerful one being the increased confidence in performing, teaching, and choreographing. This benefit was commented on by most of the focus group, which was very encouraging, as it further proves that students personally benefit from a change in pedagogy. Nichole Harston, an informant in this research, said that “my confidence can’t help but grow from this because I’m in control and I have to make the decisions.”57 Bethany Romney concluded that “Now we could be told to do anything and the whole class could do it without a problem.”58 Mekelle Johnson said that from the first day of the transformational learning experiences to the last day she noticed that she was “more confident, performed better, let myself go, and wasn’t worried about what people were thinking about me because it was just about the movement.”59 This shift from a hesitant personal focus of inadequacy to a focus on the art of ballet and the true purpose of class demonstrates how levels of confidence rose through the process.

Meg Williams also gained confidence and expressed it in this way: “With taking a more active part in class, playing a more active role instead of just the classic student-teacher roles that we both have…I realized, ‘okay, I’ve established myself well enough up until this point. I can do things for myself and decide what to do on my own. I don’t need somebody telling me what to do all the time.’”60 Another student in the group interview also commented on the sense of confidence she gained through this process. She said “I’m more confident in my ability to teach now because I’m confident I can add my style and ideas to the technique.”61 Jana Burleson said, “…and confidence too, I think that that was a major thing we all gained from it—more confident as a teacher and choreographer, but I was thinking during class how much this is going to help
my performance and so it’s interesting that this one exercise helps in all the aspects of choreography, teaching, and performance.”

In addition to confidence, which was one of the dominant outcomes from the research, there were many other benefits that emerged by shifting to a challenging, active environment from the typical passive one. First, this type of learning leads to a better attitude. Jana Burleson, when asked how she had changed from this experience, said, “I feel different. I have a better attitude and this lasted longer. There was something interesting to look forward to in class and not as many days when I didn’t want to be there.” Most of the dancers commented that they were hesitant at the beginning of this process, but it developed into an excitement as they looked forward to new experiences that helped them to grow.

Other benefits include ones that I observed and others that the students commented on in both the group and individual interviews. They include: the independence that is mentioned earlier; a broadened artistic perspective—a realization that there are many ways to do things; the fact that students become real individuals and artists with thoughts, feelings, and personalities rather than subjects in a dominating, authoritative environment; that learning becomes an exchange rather than a directive which leads to new paths and understandings by all; the fact that more students are taught because more learning styles are reached through varied methods of active involvement; a development of the “whole” dancer as the students individually have ownership in their technical and artistic abilities; the class bonding throughout the transformational process as there is less competition and comparisons occurring and more appreciation of one another’s individuality; the love for the art of ballet increasing as each student is personally engaged; the development of self-thinking artists with intuitive natures;
and, the personal progress which is easily seen from week to week by the students because they are fully invested in their passion.

Conclusion

As we consider a pedagogical shift from an informational learning approach to a transformational learning approach, probably the most important and overarching result of this action research is the connection of class to performance, the studio to the stage. This shift helps to move the art form of ballet forward in a parallel fashion with the new and innovative choreography that is constantly emerging. If we transform our teaching to reflect new ways of doing and looking at things, this will aid the students in becoming the artists they need to be. As we transform our pedagogical approach, our students are at the same time being transformed from two-dimensional dancers, with the automatic knowledge of the what of ballet, to three-dimensional dancers—artists who know the how; how to be versatile, how to be creative, how to be autonomous, and most importantly how to be artists with heart and passion that will shine through in any classical or contemporary work.

Ballet as an art form would certainly benefit from dancers who are able to express emotion and heart in their dancing; who are able to be creative, curious, and spontaneous; who enjoy and thrive on discovering the answers for themselves; and who expect to be actively involved in their own development and success both in class and on the stage. The transformational learning experiences with which we experimented in this research offer these possibilities. By addressing the research inquiry of looking at the ways in which implementing transformational learning experiences into traditional informational ballet pedagogy would aid the students in reaching higher levels of performance and artistry, we can see that change is
possible. Through the students’ own voices they expressed again and again that they felt as if they reached higher levels of personal performance and artistry. In fact, they were excited to keep dancing down the path of continued artistic development in future semesters. So, as we see that the philosophy and practice blend to result in success, we cannot help but ask ourselves if this is a pedagogical wave of forward thinking of which we need to take notice.

In order to complete the action research triangulation, the third piece of documentation involved the performance aspect. It was important to see if using current learning research to give our students what they are missing—new tools and opportunities to transform their thinking, dancing, and overall artistic experiences—really worked. This way I could see if by connecting the arc between ballet technique and choreography, it is really possible to create an artistic loop of creativity and innovation. The first piece of performance documentation was the videotaping of the focus group at midterm. The students were able to see themselves perform the transformational learning experiences that we had been implementing. They were able to judge whether or not they had increased their abilities in performance and artistry through this pedagogical shift. This was a crucial piece of documentation because it did show that an increased level of performance was reached in class by actively involving the students in the development of their heart and emotion, their creativity, and in the discovering of their own answers.

The second way that I carried this research full circle, from class to stage, was through a choreographic experience for the focus group. I choreographed a new work entitled “African Winds” this past semester. I was curious to see how the implementation of transformational learning experiences would help the students in the performance, and limited choreographic participation, of this original, contemporary ballet. In two sections of the ballet I had the
students compose their own choreography, just as they had done in class, with the style, technique, and feeling needed for this new work. It was extremely successful and their beautifully creative movements and sequences actually merged seamlessly with my choreography. Also, because of their personal exploration in class the students reached the highest level of performance for this piece that I had seen from them previously. They were able to give everything they had with a sense of confidence and freedom. Pat Debenham, an outside modern dance expert, was surprised by the level of creativity and expression, as well as the students’ ability to mesh the unique style of their work with my work. It was a beautiful collaboration that was able to start in class and finish on stage. The group interview, the personal interviews, and these performance recordings in class and on stage demonstrate the powerful possibilities that we have as teachers to transform students into dancers by incorporating transformational learning opportunities in the ballet technique class.

Ballet is one of the most beautiful of the performing arts and most certainly those of us that are invested in it do not want it to become obsolete. I feel that utilizing current educational learning approaches can help instructors and students to progress this art form forward in a new way, keeping the proven technique while approaching the pedagogical aspects of it from a different angle. Helping our students to have a transformational learning experience in ballet class will create a positive impact for ballet’s future. This fresh approach will center us on that tight rope of tradition and innovativeness and intertwine the technique of ballet class more completely with the cutting edge of today’s ballet choreography. If we are in the business of teaching dancers to be better than they were before, it is worth investing in new ways of instructing and inspiring students, helping them to transform into artists that will carry ballet onto the stages of the future.
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