

The Trivium Meets Tendus

Educating the Whole Dancer — Body, Mind, and Spirit — Through
The Lens of the Classical Education Model.

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Introduction

Dance teacher — you have influence. You are uniquely positioned alongside your students' parents, school teachers, and community to speak into their lives through the art of dance. When those those hours in the studio seem to drag into eternity while you repeat the same correction for the 473rd time, this can be easy to forget. And when the rent needs to be paid it is easy to see people as products and miss teachable moments for transactions. But what if we shifted our perspective? What if we saw each dancer as an amazing human with inherent value and approached dance training holistically to nurture the mind, body, and spirit?

As a child, if you had asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, “ballet teacher” would not have been my first answer; in fact, it wouldn't have been my second or third either. Yet, as I grew, I discovered a passion to pour into the next generation and the more time I spent in the studio, the more it became a home. Being an academically driven child, my parents were very involved in my education and built curriculum influenced by the Classical Model. It hasn't been until adulthood that I have realized the magnitude of impact these factors have had on my career — dance, mentorship, and personalized education have all collided to shape my work today.

In the following pages, I attempt to share a few of the things I have learned in my 10+ years teaching. It's not meant to be presented as the only way to teach nor is it a comprehensive how-to manual — just a few thoughts to get the conversation going. Before proceeding, know that this paper is written from the perspective of a classical ballet teacher however the concepts can be applied to almost any codified dance technique (or even beyond the studio, for that matter). Also know that the Classical Education model is incredibly more in depth than what is presented here, we are merely using the framework it is built upon as a guide for how to better understand our students' minds.

Whether you are a fellow dance educator, student, parent, or patron of the arts, may the following pages equip and encourage you that you might better equip and encourage others.

Classical Education

The Classical Education model dates back to the philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome. It was later formally developed in the Middle Ages and has since been used to educate children in all settings from private family tutoring to full time learning institutions. The goal, is to train the next generation to become well-rounded, independent thinkers, who are equipped with the tools to needed to take ownership of their own learning discovery and make informed decisions.

At a glance, the Classical Model bases education on the three stages of brain development as a child matures into an adult. The Grammar, Dialectic/Logic, and Rhetoric stages are known as the trivium. The Grammar stage of development begins in early childhood and focuses on building vocabulary, repetition of concepts, rote memorization, and an introduction to the arts. During this time, students learn broad concepts that are later referred back to as “pegs” on which to hang future knowledge. Students are answering “what” questions in this time. The Dialectic or Logic stage begins around age 9 and focuses on “how” questions — connecting the “pegs” by expanding ideas into larger concepts, filling in details for greater clarity, introducing critical thinking, and encouraging the student to gain independence in their personal study. In this stage, students begin to retain more information, communicate ideas more clearly, and take personal responsibility. The Rhetoric stage of brain development begins around age 14. Having laid the foundation, in the Grammar stage and built the house in the Logic stage, it is now time to furnish it by understanding various philosophies that lead to cultural shifts and forming a thoughtful personal position. As children mature into adults, their teachers shift into a mentor role and they should be able to articulate answers to “why” questions. See [this chart](#) for a visual of the Trivium learning stages.

Body

Dance is an aesthetic art — we cannot deny that. The quality of dance education is marked by teaching proper technique and coaching bodies to accomplish very specific movements/positions. A strong technical foundation is not negotiable for a dance teacher. May I propose that we need more than just an understanding of

codified steps and aesthetic goals to achieve? As teachers we need a well rounded approach that includes both anatomy and kinesiology.

Anatomically, we must not only have a general understanding of the human body but should recognize how each student's body is fearfully and wonderfully made. We should recognize the strengths, weaknesses, physical abilities and limitations of each student and champion them to reach their full potential.

Building upon the anatomical structure of the human body, we should also understand how the body moves. This begins with knowing our own body, analyzing how certain movements are executed, and having a general knowledge of what muscles are doing what jobs. Being able to explain *how* a movement is performed can help us, as teachers, explain vocabulary from multiple perspectives. Kinesiology also brings more depth to our dancing in that we are not simply parroting a movement or position through imitation but instead intentionally placing our body within space for a specific purpose.

Injury prevention and encouraging a healthy injury recovery process are important in training young dancers. We should be attentive to the ways each student expresses physical pain — some may complain at every hang nail while others may suffer in silence — and respond appropriately by either encouraging them to continue dancing or maybe take some time to rest. If a student is struggling in a particular area of strength, stability, range of motion, flexibility, muscle engagement, etc, we should refer them to a cross training professional or recommend exercises they may perform outside of class to trouble shoot the problem areas. This empowers the student to take responsibility for the care of their own body and training.

Let your teaching approach be informed by your knowledge of anatomy and kinesiology in order to foster individual body awareness

Mind

Growing up, I was drawn to ballet because it engages the mind and the body simultaneously — dance is as much intellectual as it is physical. I would get so excited about the complicated tendu combinations at barre that did not follow the en croix

pattern but challenged multiple direction changes (I still get excited about those). As teachers, sometimes this is easy to forget when we are asking for certain aesthetic accomplishments. Nonetheless, dance is an extremely cerebral art form. Allow me to introduce three concepts I like to incorporate into ballet class to foster intellectual engagement.

Firstly, encourage verbal participation in class. I am not suggesting class be a discussion hour or free for all; we should still respect the long standing tradition of students honoring the teacher and only speaking when spoken to in class. However, in order to accommodate different learning styles, I think it is healthy to allow students to verbalize thoughts at the appropriate time. For example, I had a class that consistently held their breath during combinations and in an effort to break that habit I told them that if I ever asked “Are you breathing?” they should answer out loud, “I am breathing.” Not only did this force them to take a breath, it also ensured they were engaged in the combination and applying the correction. For students in the Grammar stage, it is appropriate to ask them to repeat new vocabulary and its meaning out loud.

Example:

Teacher: can you say rond de jambe?

Students: Rond de Jambe

Teacher: What does rond de jambe mean?

Student after raising hand and being called on: round of the leg

Teacher: Very good! Rond de jambe means round of the leg.

This leads to our second concept — critical thinking. Personally, I like to employ the Socratic Method of leading someone to their own conclusion through asking questions. In dance class it might look something like this for a student in the late Dialectic or Rhetoric Stage:

For the purpose of our example, let's say the student fell out of their balance at the barre. In the previous weeks the teacher had been emphasizing proper placement and explaining it through anatomy and kinesiology.

Teacher: Ok, let's think about this: which way were you falling?

Student: I was falling backwards

Teacher: What muscles might not have been doing their job to make you fall that way?

Student: I wasn't holding my core or holding my upper body from my back.

Teacher: Right! Exactly. So what are you going to do next time in order to engage those muscles?

Student: I am going to think about keeping my ribs and shoulders over my hips by bringing my sternum slightly forward and up through engaging my abdominals and lengthening my pelvis.

Granted, in the above example, the teachers and student had been working together for a while and understood each other very well. In the beginning stages, you will have to coach the student to think in this manner through more simplistic questions and small corrections. Encouraging critical thinking in students allows them to be their own best teacher, prepares them to be problem solvers outside the studio, and helps them understand the “why” behind concepts. We will discuss this more when we get to educating dancers in the Rhetoric Stage.

Lastly, in training students minds it is important to have a variety of combinations. Now, there is a time and a place for everything — there is time to do a very slow class that solely focuses on technique. However, it's important to temper these classes with others that emphasize how to apply the technique. As teachers, we should balance simplicity with complexity either through alternating combinations or class themes. Personally, I like to focus on a technical concept each class and give very simple combinations that reinforce the concept; then, I will throw in at least one combination that is almost above the class level to keep them challenged and engaged. It is important not to make these combos too challenging that the students get overwhelmed and disappointed; instead they should be an inspiring goal for the students to work toward. On the other hand, it is also important not to make the simple combinations too basic that the students become bored. This is my one hesitation with curriculums that follow a strict set syllabus with the same combinations every class — it can be easy for students to slip into autopilot and dance without actually engaging

intellectually. This is not to say we should throw away set barres or repeated combinations entirely; there is a very strong case for them which we will discuss later

Three ways to foster intellectual engagement in dance class:

Encourage appropriate verbal participation

Coach students to think critically

Include a variety of combinations

Spirit

It is no secret that dance is an emotionally charged art form. Not only are dancers asked to express outward narratives to connect with the audience, they also encounter personal critiques, high levels of interpersonal communication, and constant self-assessment every single day within the studio. There is often an atmosphere of “never let them see you cry” that stems from the long standing tradition of respect for authority, keeping order in the rehearsal process, and unquestioning obedience. While I am not suggesting that we throw away proper studio etiquette (quite the opposite), I do think we need to reevaluate our psychological approach to teaching dancers in a way that encourages them to process their experiences in a healthy manner.

We must start with the premise that each dancer is an individual, created and placed on this planet for a unique purpose. On a practical level, actively calling each student by name at least once during class reinforces this concept and reminds each dancer that they are seen. Regardless of if their time with us in the studio spans the length of one class or years and years of many classes, as teachers, our job is to nurture them to reach their full potential by providing skills that can be used beyond the studio.

Taking this into account, we are able to recognize and appreciate the many, many combinations of learning styles and personalities lined up at the barre in front of us. We notice how each student responds to different types of corrections or challenges and are attentive to adjusting our teaching styles. For example, when giving a combination to a class in the Dialectic stage, I will demonstrate it while saying the

counts and steps out loud. This accommodates both an audio and visual learning style. For the kinesthetic learners, I will encourage them to do the combination with me or provide a time for them to mark it with music. It is not always possible to do this with every combination but it is good to keep in mind that we are not constantly giving combinations in the same manner every time. For students in the Rhetoric stage, we may demonstrate less and give more verbal cues to encourage them to turn information into something tangible.

After recognizing students as individuals and noticing their learning styles we can tailor our communication appropriately. Some dancers may need soft spoken suggestions whereas others may need firm, direct commands. As a student, I had a lot of teachers who always seemed to be constantly pointing out my flaws — wrong, wrong, wrong, it was all wrong. Hindsight, they were only doing their job and trying to make me a better dancer; however, when I became a teacher, I decided that I wanted to make an effort to celebrate my students' improvements while still refining their technique. Keeping this in mind, I try to offer encouragement alongside criticism. Example: “Yes, Lily, I saw you thinking about leading with your heel in tendu devant, next time, pay attention to the music so that you are on the correct counts.” Celebrate the wins — especially if a student has been working on a correction for a while. Communicate corrections with clarity and offer ample encouragement alongside criticism.

Fostering a healthy mental environment in the studio

Understand each student's learning style

Call students by name

Celebrate improvement and application of corrections.

To sum up: we want to train students' minds to think critically and be problem solvers, train their bodies to accomplish proper technique, and nurture their spirits that they might grow to reach their full potential as a unique individual. With this in mind, we'll turn to the stages of brain development and how to put together age appropriate curriculum.

Grammar Stage

Teaching young students in the Grammar Stage can be the most exhausting of all teaching jobs. Sometimes it can feel like you are merely baby sitting on a theme, other times, it is the most rewarding hour of the week. Remember, it's about more than dance.

Training the dancers body in the Grammar Stage is more about helping little ones gain a general understanding of their own body, developing coordination, and spatial awareness. Concepts such as muscle memory are touched on through repeated class exercises. At this stage, I will introduce most of the vocabulary for the year within the first few months then spend the rest of the year rotating those combinations and putting them in different orders. Example: during the first few weeks, we learn skips with hands on hips, ballet runs with arms in demi second, and arabesque position. Once these steps are decently acquired, we can do a combination of four skips with hands on hips, then run with arms demi second to the end, pose in arabesque. Skills such as marching in opposition, transfer of weight, standing on one leg, listening for rhythms, learning to count, knowing how to pointe the foot, keeping the spine tall, and jumping in clear positions are all building the foundation for what is to come

The mind in the Grammar Stage is a sponge and retains simple concepts or vocabulary to later be built upon. It is important to repeat vocabulary almost ad nauseam in this stage. Using correct terminology is crucial so that it does not have to be retaught in more advanced classes. On the flip side, it is equally important to engage the imagination at this stage. Imagery and stories can help young students connect a sense of purpose to what may otherwise seem like boring technique. It can also be fun to foster art appreciation by introducing the major classical story ballets and have the students dance them out to the music.

Differing maturity levels at this stage can lead to a mixed bag of personalities in each class making training the spirit somewhat of a challenge. As the teacher, it is important to assert your authority appropriately with the students in order to maintain order and to introduce proper studio etiquette. However, it's also important not to set your expectations too high at the risk of neither student nor teacher having fun. Within

the confines of a ballet class structure, students are learning basic social skills — how to stand in one place, how to wait your turn in line, how to respect fellow dancers' personal boundaries, how to respond appropriately to different situations, how to follow directions, etc. Recruiting an older student to be a teacher's assistant in these classes can be invaluable. Our main goal apart from coordination at this age is to help young dancers associate dance class with a safe, happy environment.

Dialectic Stage

The Dialectic or Logic Stage might be my favorite. Students have gained basic coordination and body control and are ready to begin training more in depth. In this stage, the traditional class structure is implemented and actual technique begins to be taught. Dancers start to understand localized muscle engagement and proper placement is emphasized. Technically, their dancing becomes more interesting as they learn body angles, epaulment, and more dynamic weight shifts.

Movement vocabulary expands at a rapid rate during this stage as students learn more complex steps and are able to execute longer combinations from memory. Their minds move from memorizing terminology to understanding how to connect concepts and apply corrections. At this stage, set combinations that are repeated for several months are very helpful for solidifying muscle memory. Just remember to also temper the set combinations with a few “surprises” in order to combat boredom. Fostering musicality is important at this stage to set a foundation for learning choreography later.

During the later years of the Dialectic stage in my personal training, I remember considering quitting ballet. Though I was learning a lot, it was not as “fun” anymore as I learned to adjust to the new pace and attention detail. One of my teachers even called this stage “the boring years of ballet.” This is important to keep in mind when stewarding a dancers spirit in class. Students are often noticing their inadequacies as their bodies begin to change and hormone levels rise; encouragement is key as well as recognizing individual strengths and weaknesses so that healthy habits are reinforced. To combat the “ballet blues” we can introduce the concept of artistry through more

performance opportunities. This provides allows students to explore their individual dancer voices within the structure of training.

Rhetoric Stage

As students enter high school, and their academic studies become more serious, so should their dance training. During this time, dancers are discerning the direction they may want to focus their careers and those who continue dancing past age 16 have determined that dance will benefit them some way or another in the path that they choose. It can be easy, at this stage, to focus our attention on the “talented” ones or the ones considering a professional career but we must keep in mind that nothing is wasted in life. Each dancer who has come this far, is gaining more than just muscle memory; your words and attitude toward them will be remembered for years to come. Use the time wisely to teach more than dance.

Nearing the end of puberty, students will begin to settle into their bodies and understand their individual strengths and weaknesses. Their brain-body connection solidifies, muscle command and coordination begin to become second nature. At this time, it is a good idea to introduce cross training as both a form of injury prevention and a supplement to technique class. Cross training can come in many different forms from specialized personal training (by trainers well versed in the demands of dance) to practices such as Pilates, Progressing Ballet Technique, Gyrotonics/Gyrokinesis, and many others. Dancers should also be encouraged to explore other dance disciplines beyond their favorite focus in order to foster versatility and creativity. By this time, the student’s movement vocabulary should be almost complete and as teachers, we will incorporate more complex combinations, weight changes, and choreography into our syllabus.

The mind of the student in the Rhetoric stage is now able to make intricate connections and understand the “why” behind what the teacher may be asking them to do. They learn to become their own best teacher and we should give them opportunities for self-assessment during class. A few questions I like to ask are: “What went well in that last combination? What are you proud of?” This will lead the student to celebrate their improvements. Next, I ask “What correction would you give yourself,

if you were the teacher?” Sometimes, they notice the same things you do, sometimes they do not. On the repeat of the combination, I tell them to apply their correction to themselves and see how it works. At this stage, students should be able to process corrections mid-combination. Picking up choreography quickly and attention to detail should also be coached and emphasized.

Nurturing a student’s spirit can sometimes be hardest in this stage as dancers become more independent thinkers and the training demands become more technically complex. As they discover their individual personalities, a strong sense of artistry and stage presence should be fostered. In the later years, the teacher will transition into more of a mentor role as the student eventually navigates their own path. One big question to discuss with students during this time is: “why do you dance?” As they form a response to this question, they will gain clarity in their personal purpose and learn to think more deeply.

Stage	Questions	Body	Mind	Spirit
Grammar	What?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination • Spatial Awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple Vocabulary • Engage imagination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Skills • Dance is fun!
Dialectic/Logic	How?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize placement • Localized muscle engagement • Body angles, epaulment, weight shifts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased vocabulary • Musicality • Consistent application of corrections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouragement • Healthy habits • Introduce artistry • Performance opportunities
Rhetoric	Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brain-body connection • Introduce cross training + optional disciplines • Dynamic choreography 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong attention to detail • Quick application of corrections • Critical thinking to become own problem solver 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher becomes mentor • Strong artistry • Motivated by personal “why”

Conclusion

We've spent a lot of time in the theoretical realm over the last few pages and all of us know that putting these concepts into practice within the studio is easier said than done. If you take anything from this article remember that dance is the unique outlet we've been given to interact with other humans in this world. Dance is not the goal but a means to an end; a way to encourage others to reach their full potential and provide them with skills that are useful in any setting. Understanding the Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric stages of brain development can help us plan curriculum and better communicate with students of all levels. Reminding ourselves of the wholistic approach to training body, mind, and spirit shifts our perspective beyond the studio to see the individuals before us. May we challenge ourselves to teach more than dance.



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