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Dance Experience vs. Pedagogical Knowledge in a Dance Teacher

What are the proper credentials for a dance teacher (if any)?

by Miriya Lee

The role of a dance teacher at all levels (dance studio, university, etc.) directly influences the quality of education given to aspiring dancers. After reflecting on my experiences with being mentored by teachers of all backgrounds, and being a dance major, a question that has been on my mind is, “What are the proper credentials for a dance teacher?” A common thought amongst a lot of dancers is that they don’t need an education to become successful, so they don’t attend college. However, the majority of them end up becoming teachers later on. What I aim for in this essay is to discuss the importance of both experience and pedagogical knowledge to help become a more successful dance instructor.

Benefits of Strong Dance Experience

One of the key advantages in prioritizing dance experience is being able to prepare students for the challenges of a professional dance career. Dance teachers with a lot of experience, such as being part of professional dance companies, are able to share their practical skills with their students. The embodied knowledge gained through years of training would be a very helpful tool when teachers guide students. For example, ballet professors at my university have been principal dancers of prestigious companies prior to teaching, which has helped them share both their technique and performing skills in class. Since they have firsthand experience of performing and quality training, they’re able to bring a depth of understanding to their teaching, such as how to dance in front of an audience and how to avoid certain injuries.

Dance instructors with significant professional experience can also bring valuable industry connections into the setting. These connections can open doors for students, providing opportunities for guest workshops, performances, auditions, and networking within the professional dance community. During my time at Orange County High School of the Arts in the Commercial Dance conservatory, the teachers were able to bring in agencies to have mock auditions and provide realistic perspectives on the challenges and opportunities in the dance industry. We also had the opportunity to work with various well-known choreographers that a lot of the instructors were friends with or had work experience with.

Impact of Education in a Dance Setting

There are also numerous benefits from having a strong background in academic education. Quality education such as going to a university as a dance major or pursuing some sort of degree equips dance professors with an understanding of pedagogical principles and teaching methods which is not always accessible in pure technique classes. All of these help cultivate a positive learning atmosphere and fosters a safe environment for the students.

Both pursuing some sort of degree and having experience in professional development will help dance teachers remain adaptable to the field. Dance is an ever-evolving discipline which requires teachers to be flexible and open-minded in their teaching. This adaptability is particularly crucial in a dance setting that celebrates diversity in styles and genres. A higher education also enables teachers to embrace a flexible teaching approach that accommodates the varying needs of their students. This would include knowledge of the history of the dance genre being taught, injury prevention, and pedagogical philosophy, including lesson planning and communication skills. A lot of dance instructors at small studios just pass down the knowledge from their previous mentors and some of these methods can be harmful. An example of this is included in an essay written by Robin Lakes who analyzes why practices in western concert dance training that are based on authoritarianism can be problematic. She uses Martha Graham as an example of an unenlightened teacher who “not only ignored [her company members’] individual rights but actually trampled on them” (Lakes, 3). Multiple former company members spoke up about the vocal and psychological abuse she inflicted on the dancers. If a former Martha Graham dance company member potentially went straight into teaching after their time in the company, there’s a possibility they could pass along the same toxic teaching habits that they learned from Martha Graham to their students. An experience I have witnessed similar to this in my young training years is when I took classes from Russian ballet teachers who went straight into teaching after being a principal dancer at a prestigious company. Their teaching methods were similar to Martha Graham where they had low regard for the young students’ mental well-being.

Interviews with Peers

I conducted an interview with two peers who also attended my university as dance majors and asked them to reflect on the different teachers they’ve had. Specifically, I wanted them to focus on the teachers who had either more experience or more education in their background and what was considered successful and unsuccessful in their teaching. The first interviewee’s name is Naomi Sagen, who was a fourth year and she said:

“A teacher I once had told me that when something doesn’t come as naturally to you, you have to find different ways of what works best for you. Because you have experience with dealing with trials and errors, you have the ability to share the strategies you’ve used with your students. Also, the best teachers leave their egos at the door. Being a teacher is about making the class about the student” (Sagen).

I found her points interesting because it made me realize that I have also had teachers who were very skilled, but did not know how to teach. This was because the steps came easier to them so it was harder to break down the steps to dancers who might have not had the same level of body control or coordination. To Naomi’s second point about leaving egos at the door, I have also had teachers who were equally skilled and received multiple dance degrees, but their teaching was unsuccessful because they thought about themselves more than the students. They cared more about their image to outside perspectives such as social media more than the learning experience of the students taking their class.

The second interviewee was a first year-dance major named Aarilyn Lee and she revealed:

“In my experience, the teachers I’ve had that didn’t receive a collegiate level education were more emotionally responsive in their communication such as when they gave critiques. However, they were more straightforward with their critiques, which some students prefer. I did notice that the teachers I’ve had who went to college were more considerate and encouraging when they gave corrections. But I’ve had a couple teachers who were educated and not as skilled and their demonstration of the step wouldn’t match with their explanation. This made them less credible as a teacher at times” (Lee).

In a presentation I gave about this topic, multiple students in the class also shared that their teachers who came straight from a professional dance background without going to college were less nurturing to their students. The main reason for this is because professional dancers who received intense training usually passed down that treatment to younger generations, and this sometimes involved issues in professionalism and communication. Aarilyn brings up an interesting point that although some teachers are more harsh in their teaching, some students prefer that over careful language, to push them to improve at a faster rate. A lot of famous dancers I know are where they’re at today because of how cut-throat their mentors were. For some dancers, hard treatment forced them to have a stronger mentality; for others, it contributed negatively to their mental and physical health.

Benefits of Pedagogical Knowledge

Some research that provided an interesting perspective on this topic was written by a dance teacher named Sarah Alaways, who investigated the professional performance experience versus pedagogical knowledge in teaching technique classes from six teachers. One of the teachers named Elizabeth Anderson spoke on the importance of “knowing what you’re about” (Alaways, 220). In other words, it’s not about what and how much you know, but it’s about how you inhabit and understand your role as a teacher. The findings from these six teachers emphasize that the quantity of teaching experience is less crucial than having a diverse range of experiences and maintaining a reflective attitude on their own teaching practices. The research suggests that pedagogical knowledge, whether self-researched or formally trained, is equally effective with a flexible approach. They proved this by discussing the impacts of two teachers, one transitioning from artist to educator and the other from educator to artist. They were found to be equally valuable because they both showcased the importance of critical understanding in creatively approaching content. The most significant part of a teacher is how they translate their experiences into effective classroom practices for students. Based on this study, it is proven that some form of pedagogical knowledge plays a role in advancing dance as a creative art form.

From what I have gathered from my research and conversations with peers, there are many different factors that make a successful dance teacher. However, the combination of experience and education is most likely to help result in a dance teacher who is able to share their practical skills and also cultivate a healthy environment. A teacher’s practical experience brings authenticity and depth to their instruction, while a quality education provides the necessary pedagogical framework to continuous improvement. But most importantly, it is how you use your experiences and knowledge to make the class most beneficial for your students.



Miriya graduated with a BFA in choreography from the University of California, Irvine in June of 2024. Her goal is to become a world-renowned choreographer in hip hop and contemporary dance.

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