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The choreography of apology

How do you respond to a correction in ballet class? Feedback is necessary to learning dance, but can both teachers and dancers change the hidden culture of shaming?

by Kaylee Kollins

“Sorry.”

A dancer says after missing a count of choreography.

“Sorry.”

A dancer says after receiving a correction.

“Sorry.”

A dancer says when asking a question.

Why are dancers apologizing so much? As someone who has grown up in ballet dance culture, it’s almost a natural reflex to say sorry inside the ballet space. Any “mistake” can lead to an immediate apology, whether it is physical or verbal. The word sorry echoes through a classroom so often that it becomes a regular part of the studio environment. Apologies become instinctive. Most of the time, an apology occurs when a person does something “wrong.” Sometimes an apology occurs without a mistake happening at all. Sometimes a dancer seems to apologize simply for existing.

I can think back to many instances in my youth where participating in a ballet class almost felt like a humiliation ritual. Getting singled out could stop the flow of class and translate into an immediate physical response. My worst nightmare. It was where I learned not to cross my arms for fear of looking negative. I specifically remember apologizing for that posture until I broke the habit. Something as small as crossing your arms was not welcome in ballet spaces because it could come across to teachers as not wanting to be there or being closed off. As someone who is now a working professional in the industry, I still see this “humiliation ritual” practiced by instructors, and it makes me wince. As a ballet teacher now, I notice those simple physical behaviors, like dancers crossing their arms, and it reminds me of my childhood and the ridicule I experienced.

What intrigues me the most is not whether dancers should apologize—there’s nothing wrong with saying “sorry” when something really does go wrong—but how constant apologizing begins to choreograph itself into the body. Over time, “sorry” becomes less of a verbal response and more of a physical reaction: lowering the eyes, crossing the arms to appear smaller, nervous laughter, hiding, and so on. The correction of a mistake might end, but the body continues to apologize. The younger you are when introduced to dance, more specifically ballet, the more these patterns can become cemented into behavior.

Young dancers quickly discover that mistakes are visible and that corrections carry emotional weight. Many learn to apologize without even understanding what they are apologizing for. “Sorry” becomes a habit rather than a sincere expression. Dancers apologize for being injured, asking questions, needing clarification, or just for struggling. Sometimes, dancers seem to apologize simply for existing imperfectly within the space.

Why does this happen?

Dance spaces are uniquely vulnerable to this phenomenon because most, if not all, aspects of dance are tied to visibility. Why else would mirrors line the studio walls? We are expected to be the artwork while fine-tuning our instrument, the body. To dance is to place your body under constant observation. Dancers watch themselves, teachers watch dancers, and dancers watch one another. Corrections rarely occur in private because they unfold immediately in front of peers, choreographers, and teachers. Sometimes a teacher may pull a student aside to give a correction while class continues, but because it stops the flow of class, it happens less often. That is often as private as a correction gets.

The beautiful yet damning thing about ballet is that there is always something you can make better. You will never be perfect. Because of this, dancers become highly sensitive to error. Ballet demands precision, repetition, adjustment, refinement, and discipline, yet perfection remains unreachable. A dancer has to learn to enjoy the process of continually working toward something they may never fully achieve, or the journey will always feel like an uphill battle. Corrections are therefore a normal and necessary part of dance culture. Leelo Keevallik, a scholar who researches how movement knowledge is transmitted in dance and other practices, argues that corrections are a normal aspect of dance culture. Correction is not an occasional event; in fact, it is foundational to dance. Dancers are expected to think quickly on their feet and visibly improve after correction. The studio space functions through cycles of observing and responding physically. The teacher watches, sometimes gives notes, to which the dancers respond, dancers “fail,” dancers correct, and then repeat.

There is value in this process. Feedback is integral to learning, and dancers need corrections in order to grow. Yet corrections also have the potential to single out dancers insensitively. A teacher stops the movement, the dancer becomes the center of attention, and everyone watches. That attention can feel very different depending on what comes next. Praise can bring a dancer a sense of accomplishment or pride. A negative correction can create embarrassment, self-consciousness, or the immediate feeling that something has gone wrong.

This constant visibility is intensified by the hierarchy of dance. Most dance environments operate within a hierarchical structure: teacher and student, choreographer and dancer, director and company member. Within these systems, politeness and discipline become intertwined. A “good” dancer is attentive, agreeable, hardworking, quiet, and receptive to corrections. A dancer’s ability to receive criticism without resistance is often treated as professionalism. Therefore, postures of apology can become part of the overall performance of what it means to be a dancer.

When correction becomes internalized

Embedded inside the process of correction is another form of learning that happens subconsciously. As dancers, we are not only learning movement; we are also learning behavioral responses to imperfection. Keevallik writes that “talk and the body mutually elaborate on each other.” In other words, teachers’ words can affect students physically. In the dance world, this relationship becomes visible. The phrase “I’m sorry” is seldom just spoken; the body participates in the apology. A teacher’s correction can transform a dancer’s posture, confidence, and movement quality almost instantly. A dancer’s energy may drop, their shoulders may slightly internally rotate, and their movement may become more careful moving forward. On the other hand, positive feedback can produce a sense of accomplishment, pride, or even a simple smile. The body responds to what is being communicated.

These qualities become more apparent in dancers who are new to the culture of dance. As time goes on, more experienced dancers may mask these responses better or understand that they do not need to apologize for existing. I notice in my own classes that some dancers become physically smaller after a correction, both emotionally and in their energy. Their movement loses attack, and risk-taking disappears. The dancer becomes self-conscious and ends up monitoring themselves rather than embodying whatever they need to. This self-monitoring is deeply connected to the structure of authority in the dance world. Keevallik writes that correction “enables the students to ‘see’ their own bodies.” Through mirrors, demonstrations, and teacher feedback, dancers learn to observe themselves externally. While this external awareness is necessary for the technical demands of dance, it can also develop into relentless self-surveillance. Over time, dancers begin to anticipate criticism before it arrives. A teacher walks by, and the dancer corrects themselves, which can be both positive and negative.

Constant corrections in the ballet studio is a double-edged sword. In order to learn and grow, repetition and feedback must happen. The only way to get better at dancing is to rinse and repeat. There is, however, a fine line between helpful feedback and feedback that is not helpful. Dancers train muscle memory constantly, and repeated behaviors eventually become embodied habits. It’s logical to suggest that emotional responses may become conditioned similarly to muscle memory. If a dancer repeatedly learns to contract after criticism, that contraction may turn into a pattern. The correction ends, but the body remembers.

The body of shame for women

This physical performance of apology also intersects with gender. Dance environments such as ballet have historically rewarded qualities associated with conventional femininity: delicacy, agreeability, silence, and self-discipline. Dance scholar Gretchen Alterowitz describes “authoritarian practices” that construct dancers as “docile subjects” under institutional authority. Female-presenting dancers are often socialized to avoid appearing difficult or disruptive. Apology can therefore become tied not only to professionalism, but also to gendered expectations about behavior.

A dancer who apologizes demonstrates awareness of error. They show humility. Their response signals respect for authority. Even when teachers insist that dancers stop apologizing, the reflex

can remain. The apology becomes automatic because it has somehow become social currency within a studio environment. It reassures teachers that the dancer is taking ownership of their mistake and accepting responsibility for it, even as it can produce shame in the dancer. Margaret Werry and Róisín O’Gorman describe shame as something that “makes tangible the contours of institutional and social power.” This idea is particularly relevant to dance training because much of dance pedagogy relies on public class correction and hands-on correction.

Power structures in dance are communicated not only through explicit rules, but also through bodily behavior. There’s the dancer who lowers her gaze after being told to show the class a combination. The dancer who laughs nervously after forgetting choreography. The instinct to internally contract after being singled out, even for doing something right. These sometimes undetectable gestures reveal how thoroughly authority can shape movement itself. They also demonstrate how shame becomes embodied. Rather than existing solely as an internal emotion, shame can appear through physical responses such as avoiding eye contact, collapsing posture, and contracting the body. In ballet studios, where the body is constantly visible and evaluated, these reactions can emerge almost instantly following feedback from a teacher. Shame therefore becomes not only something dancers feel, but something they perform physically, revealing the ways institutional power can become embedded within movement itself.

Perfectionism intensifies this dynamic. Dance culture can treat precision as moral as well as technical. Because dance happens through the body in movement, mistakes can also feel personal. The body becomes a site of evidence for failure. Dancers learn not only about steps and placement, but also that visibility can carry risk. Perhaps this is why apology becomes so deeply choreographed within dance culture. It is rehearsed repeatedly through minuscule daily interactions until it becomes a natural instinct. The dancer learns not only how to execute movement, but how to physically respond to imperfection.

When teaching becomes part of the problem

If dancers are learning these physical responses through repeated interactions with teachers, then part of the problem may lie within the teaching culture itself. Discipline and correction are essential to dance training. Precision matters. Accountability matters. Dance cannot exist without refinement. The question is not whether dancers should receive feedback, but what kind of culture that feedback creates.

More than twenty years ago, scholar Robin Lakes identified authoritarian teaching practices as a largely hidden problem within concert dance. She argued that the “secret” of authoritarian teaching practices needed to be “outed” and examined in order to understand its dangers and “point the way toward reform.” Gretchen Alterowitz similarly addresses the authoritarian structures embedded within ballet pedagogy and considers how teaching strategies might move toward a more feminist approach. As someone who has experienced these teaching methods and now teaches ballet myself, I can see both sides of the correction process. There are corrections that expand a dancer’s knowledge and corrections that make a dancer afraid to make another mistake. There are corrections that encourage a dancer to try again and corrections that cause the dancer to disappear inside themselves.

I have heard both kinds of feedback in ballet classrooms. A dancer can be told, “That was horrible,” or, “My grandma could do better than that!” And, in case you were wondering, yes, that is actual feedback I have heard in a ballet class. But a dancer can also hear, “This concept takes time, let’s break it down together,” or, “Great start, now see if you could add more length through your spine.” Both approaches communicate that something needs to change. The difference is in what else the dancer receives with the correction.

The tone in which feedback is given is crucial. There is no point in tearing a dancer down for making a mistake or needing help. A correction should provide information that allows a dancer to move forward, rather than creating shame that causes them to retreat. This raises an important question about what dance education should encourage. Can rigor exist without shame? Can dancers be held accountable without being humiliated? What would rehearsal spaces look like if mistakes were treated less like failures and more like valuable information?

Rehearsing a different response

Teaching styles are now more important than ever as the next generation of dancers explore conversations about mental health, power within the arts, and progressive pedagogy. Many dancers and educators are beginning to reconsider older models of authoritarian training that relied heavily on fear and intimidation. Trauma-informed approaches to dance pedagogy ask educators to consider how teaching practices affect dancers beyond technical development. As teachers, we do not need to eliminate feedback altogether. Instead, we can consider how corrections are given and take into account the emotional and physical responses they can invoke in dancers’ bodies. Progressive pedagogy does not mean lowering standards. It means recognizing that there are multiple ways to help a dancer reach those standards.

But teachers are not the only people who can interrupt the apology cycle. Dancers also have to learn how to receive correction without automatically turning it into a judgment of their worth. The fact is, dancers will probably always encounter feedback that is not helpful. The very word “correction” communicates that something is not there yet. A dancer cannot control every teacher they will encounter, every tone they will hear, or every environment in which they will work. What dancers can begin to control is what they *do* with the information. Instead of hearing a correction and immediately thinking, *I did something wrong, I am embarrassing myself, I am sorry*, a dancer might begin to separate the information from the shame attached to it. As in, *Thank you. I’ll work on that*. That response does not reject correction. It accepts the information without accepting the idea that the dancer should feel ashamed for needing it.

This is where dancers can begin to reverse the choreography of apology. The goal is not to stop caring about improvement. The goal is to stop confusing imperfection with failure. A dancer can be corrected and still be capable. A dancer can ask a question and still be intelligent. A dancer can make a mistake and still belong in the room. The body may have learned to apologize, but learned behaviors can also be changed. Bodies remember, but they can also relearn.

Dancers will always make mistakes—it’s human nature to do so. It’s what happens next that’s important. For generations, dancers have learned not only steps and placement in the ballet

studio but also how to respond when they believe they have fallen short. And if “sorry” has become a rehearsed response, perhaps a different response can be rehearsed too.

Maybe the most significant choreography many dancers learn is not the one performed onstage, but the one practiced quietly in studios every day. If we become aware of that choreography, we can begin to change it.

Teachers can become more aware of their words and choose the ones that work without shaming. Dancers can listen to the correction without becoming the mistake. We can take the information without taking on the shame.

And perhaps, instead of apologizing for being imperfect dancers, we can simply keep dancing.



Kaylee Kollins is a dancer, choreographer, Pilates instructor, and graduate researcher whose work explores identity, embodiment, pedagogy, and kinesthetic empathy within contemporary, modern, and ballet dance practices. Currently pursuing a master's degree in dance at the University of California, Irvine, her scholarship is informed by her lived experience as a mixed individual. Her research centers on how dance functions as both a site of personal memory and a means of cultural and emotional connection.

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