

## **A Creative Approach to Technique** **By Jessica Nicoll**

(originally created to accompany workshops presented at the Dance Education Laboratory, 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y Harkness Dance Center from 1996 to 2010; revised yearly.)

### **What Is Dance Technique and Why Teach It To Children?**

Mary Joyce answers this question beautifully in her book Dance Technique for Children:

“ . . . Dance technique for children is more elemental than technique for any particular form of dance. The goal is to teach the child to move safely and efficiently. Instruction focuses on principles, not on details of style.

“ . . . What matters is not how high the leg will go, but how the leg goes; not the pointed toe, but the stretch from the center; not a specific use of the head, but the follow-through of the head from the line of the spine; not the ability to place the arms and legs in opposition, but the understanding of the torque of the body. The way in which the energy of the body is used is important, the way in which the contraction and release of muscles are used to stretch, bend, twist, circle, lift, fall, and step in time and space. Such uses of the body in relation to the physical laws of motion on earth, inertia, momentum, gravity, and reaction, are the basics that are clarified for children and by children in a technique class.”<sup>1</sup>

In short, dance technique for children, according to Mary Joyce, is not about learning a *style*, it is about understanding and building skills in the variety of ways in which a human can move.

When asked for a definition of technique, my fourth grade students say, “a way to do something.” Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary defines technique as “The method or the details of procedure essential to expertness of execution in any art, science, etc.” With that in mind, the first question for a teacher interested in teaching any technique is, “At what do you want your students to be expert?” The answer to that question will lead the teacher to the elements she or he will explore, to the details that are important, and to the outcomes she or he hopes to foster.

Webster’s definition of style, on the other hand, is “distinctive or characteristic mode of presentation, construction, or execution in any art, employment, or product, especially in any fine art; also distinctive manner or mode of singing, playing, behaving, etc.” One way to think of this contrast between “technique” and “style” might be to think of technique as uncovering—finding and developing the strength, range of skill, and variety of energy within an individual; whereas “style” can be seen as adding on—teaching students to adopt a distinctive method or manner that has been developed through a school, tradition, or individual artist.

### **The Spine**

Sydney Pollack, the actor-director-screenwriter appeared a few years ago in an “Inside the Actor’s Studio” interview broadcast on the Bravo cable television network.

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<sup>1</sup>Dance Technique for Children by Mary Joyce, Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company (1984), pp. 1-2.

Assessing his career as a filmmaker, he revealed intriguing connections to the teaching of dance. (In fact, during the course of the interview Pollack said he had learned more about building a solid screenplay by studying dance with Louis Horst than through any other approach to film writing.)

Pollack said that the key to creating a good film lay in discovering its “spine.” Each scene, he suggested, should then reflect that spine -- should in some way expand, dramatize, confirm the core idea around which the entire picture revolves. For dancers, there is an immediate, literal, physical connection to that idea: how dancers move from their centers—their torsos and spines—is a key element in their dancing lives. In some way, even the way a dancer uses the fingers should be connected deep within—to the spine.

Beyond such a literal, physical application of that idea, dance teachers can find a connection to their class structure as a whole. As Mary Joyce points out, the whole being—physical, spiritual, intellectual—is involved in creating art.<sup>2</sup> When a teacher chooses a focus for a class—whether spatial or rhythmic concepts, issues of force and quality, the use of imagery in choreography, the meanings and origins of a traditional dance form, or principles of alignment—she or he should be able to find a way in which that focus runs through the entire class, including the moments that concentrate on what we think of as technique. Just as Mr. Pollack speaks of continually re-connecting to the spine of a film, teachers can find ways in which each activity in some way “expands, dramatizes, or confirms the core idea around which the entire picture revolves.”

### **Finding The Spine**

Finding the spine, then—of one’s teaching, of a class, of a semester—is essential in my approach to technique. In a sense, structuring one’s class and deciding what goes in it is a process of working backward: finding a focus for the class as a whole, then relating activities to that focus. An internal logic holds the class together.

How to find a worthwhile focus? This depends on two interrelated aspects of observation and reflection: (1) Consider the question posed on the first page — “At what do you want your students to be expert?” The answer tells a teacher what she or he values, what is important in getting children dancing. (2) Consider the actual students dancing in front of you. See them dancing the material you’ve given them and ask what is the crux of that exercise or dance; what do they offer; what are they missing; what would enliven their dancing? In short, what do they bring and what do they need? What they have and what they need—whether related to rhythm or timing, awareness of curves or angles in space, use of the breath or of the torso when initiating a specific movement—provide a store-house of themes for the responsive teacher.

Knowing whether an idea is big enough is critical in developing a worthwhile spine. Noticing a lack of extension through the arms during adagio phrases, a teacher may think the dancers simply need more practice: keep working on those arm positions. But is “arm positions” a big enough theme for a class? For me, no. By thinking about the heart of the problem—lengthening or stretching, feeling a connection to the center of the body and extending fully into space—I may focus on a theme of elasticity or of spatial design. The problem I see in the dancers’ use of their arms offers a theme that should not

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<sup>2</sup>Dance Technique for Children by Mary Joyce, p. 2.

only improve the way in which they perform this particular adagio, but deepen their understanding of a physical sensation, make their dancing as a whole more connected, and—no small feat—offer them some aesthetic understanding. By both exploring for themselves and observing fellow students improvise with the idea of elasticity or spatial design, the dancers bring new understanding to their dancing when they repeat the set adagio.

### Connecting to the Spine

I think about technique not in isolation, but as a fluid element of dance training. Improvisation and exploratory movement, expressive content, choreographic craft, individual student's interests, and aesthetics are, for me, integrated into the technique and are woven throughout the class. Exploring technique through many approaches—shifting attention, thought, or energy, for example, and incorporating what Mary Joyce refers to as the physical, spiritual, and intellectual—offers an opportunity for artistic transformation. There are three ways in which I aim to blend artistry and creativity with technical skill while connecting to the spine of the class: **(1)** choose the focus or theme for the class and then examine how the technical skills to be presented can relate to that focus or theme; **(2)** find what might make a “technical” exercise *dance*; and **(3)** offer *challenges* that surprise and engage students. These challenges push technique beyond acquisition of skill and into territory that is interesting, fun, and alive.

#### (1) *Connect Each Exercise to the Whole Lesson*

We often think that dancers do pliés every day because it's what dancers do to make their legs strong and to prepare for and recover from jumps. And if a class includes leaps and jumps, pliés are a natural part of that class. If our only association to pliés, however, is one of preparation, and if we simply go through the motions of a repetitive action because it's what we do, we may miss deeper understandings or connections to our dancing. By connecting a plié series concretely (and interestingly) to each new day in dance, other understandings of the action may emerge. Whether a teacher's theme relates to creative dance-making elements (use of levels and space, qualities of movement, tempo, use of focus, etc.) or connects to the teaching of a traditional dance form (whether teaching the West African dance Manjiani, a set ballet or tap phrase, etc.) she or he should be able to look inside that form and find ways to direct students' focus on the “bigger” dance they are working toward. It might be the same plié dance you've done many times, but now the dancers are thinking about it in a new way.

#### (2) *Dance Each Exercise*

Within each technical exercise—done, perhaps, to develop physical strength or a greater understanding of alignment—is a dance. A series of *rond de jambes* might form a dance about circles and lines or perhaps about the connection from the tip of one's big toe to the top of one's head. Having chosen a theme and the kinds of exercises that deepen that theme, a teacher can consider, “What is it about this particular exercise—or even about this particular exercise on this particular day—that is distinct and danceable?”

Perhaps the teacher creates a short dance phrase using that technical skill. Though brief and repeatable, the phrase is built just as one would build a good dance: it's interesting, challenging, and develops from beginning to end. Or perhaps the dance of

*rond de jambes* this day is extended through a structured improvisation. Either way, the technique comes alive by being danced.

### (3) Offer Challenges

Watch the faces of children in a dance class when their teacher asks them to return to their places by a certain count; to hold a balance for as long as they can; to combine three distinct sections of a phrase they've never put together before; to feel a unison together *without* the music. Ecstasy. The sense of joy and accomplishment in reaching toward a challenging goal is palpable.

These three methods of integrating creative artistry with technical goals (*connect to a theme, make it a dance, offer a challenge*) are not separate moments in a class; they are on-going facets of the work, unified by the intent to extend students' dancing and deepen their understanding.

### Example

For example: foot springs. Why do them? To strengthen the feet; to develop the sense of articulation that allows for soft landings from jumps; to experience the dynamic change from a forceful spring to a relaxed recovery; to feel the connection and alignment from the feet and ankles through the knee to the thigh and hip—many reasons, easily considered technical, all found in a simple foot spring. And in watching my students the previous week, I have noticed that they need to continue to develop the strength and articulation of their feet.

At the same time, I've chosen an overall theme for today's class, also based on watching my students and identifying their interests and needs. My theme is rhythmic patterning and accents. I will ask my students to improvise with rhythm and accent, but would also like to make a connection between the rhythmic theme and the dancers' "technical" work on foot articulation.

So I explore rhythmic variations in a series of foot springs, playing with different timing in the same action. I do two springs slowly, breaking down the spring into "ball-toe-ball-heel" and then two quickly—"to the point-heel down—to the point-heel down." Then I decide that a brief, fun traveling pattern uses the foot spring and also offers a challenge: the dancers improvise their own paths away from and back to their spots (or on to a new spot) in a quick "step-spring-step-spring-step-spring-recover" pattern. Perhaps some students are ready for another challenge within the theme: to accent the foot springs by flicking another body part at the same time.

### **A Living Art Form**

A creative approach to dance technique offers teachers a way to keep not only their students' dancing, but also their own process of teaching alive and artistic. When both the teacher and the students are curious about the process, letting creative and technical challenges play off one another and lead to solutions that deepen understanding, the focus of class shifts to the artistry of dancing. Teacher and student together become part of a living art form; class is not preparation for dance, it *is* dance.

## PROCESS

- (1) What is the focus of my class and how can technical skills be presented to deepen that focus?
- (2) Where is the *dancing* in each technical exercise?
- (3) What challenges will keep the technique interesting and fun?

## REMEMBER:

- ☞ Technique can be exciting for children. Becoming stronger, meeting new challenges, discovering the way the body works—all can be fun and fascinating. Help students learn how they can move efficiently and safely with a sense of enjoyment and discovery.
- ☞ Know what skills you want your students to develop. While they are dancing look for the detail that's missing; what tools will help dig into the movement more deeply—using the breath differently? thinking about angles and curves? finding clear and specific imagery to deepen the experience? connecting visually to other dancers as they move?
- ☞ Patterns are intrinsically rewarding. Take a phrase the students know and play with it: different timings, facings, groupings using stillness and canon, etc.
- ☞ Images help—but don't overload the movement with the imagery. When using image, make space for students' own offers; children are excellent imaginers.
- ☞ Know your plan well enough that you can change it and improvise as the class unfolds. Don't weigh yourself (and your students) down with the structure and meaning of every moment of your class. Be surprised sometimes by where a class goes: students can lead you to the fun in a movement or a new, unexpected idea.
- ☞ Technique need not be separate from “dancing” and from “creative” work. If you treat technique as warm-up (and then move on to what your class is *about*) you're missing the opportunity to develop students' technical skills within the context of full-out moving/dancing. Also, your students will be wading through the warm-up, not enjoying their dancing all the way through class. Integrate students' creative input with skills that add to their range.
- ☞ “Technique” is distinct from “style” or “school.” Teachers may need to teach both—techniques specific to a school or tradition as well as the fundamentals about which Mary Joyce writes. Be clear about which you are teaching and about what is essential within these styles and techniques for children.