

## **Connecting Dance with Popular Educational Theories**

by Sandra Minton, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus Dance,  
University of Northern Colorado

Anyone who has been involved in dance for a period of time knows that dance students learn how to observe movements as they are demonstrated. Learning movement also means developing focusing and memory abilities. Students venturing into choreography soon realize dance making takes time to learn, but it can provide the satisfaction of having solved a problem in a creative way. The premise here, however, is that learning dance technique or choreography is not separate from, but connects with a larger educational picture, particularly when dance classes are designed with careful thought and a knowledge of best practices.

There are many theories that abound in education today. One of these is Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Simply stated, this theory describes a child's developmental level and the amount of learning that can be accomplished. This means a child's experiences need to match his or her developmental level. Thus, pre-school or kindergarten dance students have a short attention span and need a class in which content changes or is varied. Such young students also do not have the physical coordination to master intricate dance steps and are much more comfortable with creative movement experiences based on ideas that are familiar.

Learning Style is another educational theory that can be connected to dance. Today, teachers realize that all students do not learn in the same way, because some process information primarily by hearing it (auditory); others prefer to see drawings or diagrams (visual); and a third group prefers physically interacting with what they are learning (tactile-kinesthetic). Dance class by virtue of its content appeals readily to tactile-kinesthetic learners, but it can also appeal to the visually oriented through the use of photos and drawings of dance movements, and by providing movement demonstrations that proceed in a step-by-step manner. In addition, clear verbal descriptions of movements are needed to accommodate auditory learners.

Since the 1980's, the Multiple Intelligences (MI) is another theory that has permeated education. Howard Gardner and others who developed this theory stated that there are many forms of intelligence such as musical, spatial, body-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal. The premise here is that a well-designed dance class helps students develop a variety of intelligences. Most would agree that dance helps students develop their musical and kinesthetic intelligence. Nevertheless, spatial intelligence, which is the ability to see and manipulate images in the mind, can be part of doing choreography if students visualize parts of a dance they are creating. Interpersonal intelligence is developed if students work in groups to make a dance, but intrapersonal intelligence, the ability to focus inward, is enhanced when students create movements based on their own feelings and ideas.

Finally, we come to the theory Brain-Based Learning which was developed from recent discoveries in the neurosciences on how the human brain thinks and understands. One of the principles of this theory states that students learn best by understanding patterns or relationships between bits of information. When designing classes dance teachers need to think carefully about what is presented first in a class and how it relates to later movement materials. Class

progression must make sense and aid learning. When choreography class is based on best practices, students learn to structure movement phrases and complete dances--a process that involves creating patterns or relationships between single movements and between sections in a dance.

Another tenet of Brain-Based Learning is that learning is encouraged through challenge, but discouraged by threat. This means that the atmosphere in a class should be challenging enough to stimulate interest, but not so challenging that students become nervous and fearful. In the face of such a threat, students shut down and learning is stifled.

Learn more about the connections between dance and education in [\*Using Movement to Teach Academics: The Mind & Body As One Entity\*](#) by Sandra Minton and published by Rowman & Littlefield Education 1-800-462-6420 or 301-459-3366. You can contact Sandra at 303-450-6347 or E-mail [slminto@msn.com](mailto:slminto@msn.com).