

Higher-Ed Voice | Semester One—Won!

May 23, 2008



Reality shock among freshman dance majors and how to overcome it

By Jeanne Fornarola

Each fall they enter the dance studio, faces full of fake confidence or sheer panic. Some arrive for class 30 minutes early; some run in late, in breakdown mode because of morning alarm malfunctions. New leotards, pink tights, some sparkles somewhere, intact ballet shoes, some still sporting a color other than pink (probably leftover from a matched recital costume). They have arrived. The new recruits. The freshmen class of '0?



UB student Amanda Rossitz was surprised to find that non-dance majors criticized her choice to pursue dance. (Photo by Jeanne Fornarola)

“My name is Jeanne and I’ll be your instructor for freshman ballet. This is our accompanist, Kevin. Left hand on the barre, please. Two demis, one grand port de bras forward . . .”

With my words, so the journey begins. For these students the next step toward a professional career in dance begins in a college dance program. All college freshmen go through a transitional period as they adjust to feelings of homesickness, new freedoms, and academic and social pressures. Dance majors are no exception, but added to the traditional list are a few discipline-specific adjustments.

Most students who have been accepted into a university dance program were at the top of their game in their hometown studio. In some cases they are shocked that others can turn and jump as

proficiently as they can. However, most of these students have ventured outside of their dance environments by participating in competitions or summer programs, and they are prepared to work hard to measure up.

Transitioning

Dance in academia has its own culture and subculture, and incoming students should be aware of that. They should throw away any dance attire that matches and don purple argyle knee socks with rolled-up sweats—dance majors are hipsters. Fashion statements are fun and easy; other questions require more thought. Life as a dance major is a new experience. Some questions worth considering include:

- What's a typical day like? How much time is spent in rehearsal; how much in lectures? Will I get enough hours of dance in a day?
- What performance possibilities will I have? Will I be in performances as a freshman?
- If I have a dance injury, will there be health care that's attuned to the specific needs of dancers?
- Are yoga, Pilates, and other related disciplines available?
- Will I have the option of rooming with other dance majors?
- If I spend my days in classes with mostly women, will I ever get a date?
- How isolated (if at all) are dance students—physically, culturally, or because of the time demands of their specialty—from other students?

Reality shock

The first surprise comes when students realize that they need to go to the bookstore and spend time in the library as well as the studio. Common to most university dance programs is a dance curriculum, accompanied by textbooks and supported by written as well as practical exams. Students quickly learn to embrace the academic side of dance, realizing that an understanding of history informs their artistic quality as they perform studies in Fosse or Luigi, Balanchine or Graham. (And yes, spelling counts. Points off for the misspelling of paradiddle or temps de cuisse.) Lectures and recitations in dance analysis and criticism, along with increased exposure to professional performances, allow the students to formally study the elements of choreography, dance history, and dance pedagogy. Soon they begin to emerge as creators and contributors to the artistic process.

Through required classes in anatomy and kinesiology, students soon begin to make significant improvements in technique. Daily classes emphasize the importance of executing movement safely and properly so as to achieve continued growth and development injury free. Their iliopsoas? They may not be sure where it is or what it does, but they are pretty sure it is sore. They adjust well to adjunct subject matter that defines and augments dance, but new forms of insecurity pop up in strange places. What seem unachievable are the finesse and the artistry of the upperclassmen. Dance-major rookies worry that they won't achieve the level of sophistication they see in the seniors, and it seems to threaten and motivate them at the same time.

Freshman wisdom

But enough of a teacher's perspective. After all, I still insist on hair being in a neat bun, and I

would never end class without a proper reverence. I posed the question to my freshman class at University of Buffalo: "What advice would you give a first-semester dance major?" Four second-semester "veterans" offer sage advice.

Laura Crowe of Chicago, IL, on self-motivation:

One thing that students need to get a grip on is that improvement and success are based almost completely on their own self-motivation. For example, there is no one telling me I have to go to class. If I don't feel like going, my mom isn't there to force me.

Amanda Rossitz of Rochester, NY, on overcoming public opinion:

One of the things that surprised me when I came to UB was the treatment I received from other students as well as adults because I am a dance major. I had a suitemate who actually believed I wouldn't make it anywhere in life because I chose dance as a major. I decided not to listen to a lot of the students' remarks; it's not their life, it's mine. My advice for incoming freshmen is to follow their hearts. I know it's hard not to care what others think, but if it's what you love, then it's worth it.

Krista Scimeca of Albany, NY, on finding new confidence:

The most overwhelming obstacle I had to overcome as a first-semester freshman was having [enough] confidence in myself. In my high school studios I worked my way up through the ranks quite quickly, and I was comfortable with my fellow dancers and instructors. Even though the confidence wasn't always there, the comfort level was, so I never thought about it. It took me the full first semester to realize that I needed to be more confident in myself to succeed here. Since I have made that realization, I feel as if I've given myself more room to improve, and I am enjoying myself much more as well.

Carrie Jurcak, Plymouth, MI, on being open-minded:

The biggest shocker for me on entering the dance program was how accepting and willing to help everyone is. The instructors don't treat freshmen like babies; they provide guidance and always lend their support. I expected that the upperclassmen would be mean or completely ignore the freshmen, but I couldn't have been more wrong! They are always there to answer any questions, lend a helping hand, or just have a good laugh.

Their iliopsoas? They may not be sure where it is or what it does, but they are pretty sure it is sore.

I also had no idea that dance majors would have to take written tests based on dance history, dance terminology, etc. If I could give one piece of advice to freshmen dance majors, it would be to go in with an open mind—no matter how much you know there is always more to learn. I now realize that it doesn't matter where you dance, what you dance to, or who you dance with; once you find the artist within you, anything is possible. I never expected to learn and improve so much in just one semester!

Easing the transition

If university professors keep in mind the dancers' transition from studio to college, and studio

teachers incorporate college preparation for the potential dance major, everybody wins. Here are some tips for helping your students “take the next step.”

- *Build students' vocabulary*

Incorporate the use and spelling of all dance vocabulary into your classes. Hand out terminology sheets, give quizzes, and use a classroom blackboard or dry erase board as a teaching aid

- *Teach history*

Expose your students to basic innovators in the field. When teaching contractions, talk about Graham; when teaching Luigi arm patterns, talk about the dancer himself. Make sure that the students are familiar with the history of the ballet technique they are studying. You don't have to offer separate dance history classes; as you teach the technique, supplement the physical instruction with information about the movement's origins. That way your students will have context that will enrich their dancing.

- *Emphasize alignment*

One of the most important aspects of technique is alignment. Understanding body placement and use of the center, or core, is essential.

- *Modern dance*

Students who have had consistent classes in modern techniques have an immediate advantage. Most students have limited experience in the form and it is core curriculum in many college programs.

- *Include improvisation*

Being comfortable with improvisation eases feelings of intimidation and self-consciousness. Start teaching creative problem-solving skills while the students are young.

- *Broaden their horizons*

Encourage students to attend a variety of performances and master classes and to read dance reviews, biographies, and trade magazines.

The home teacher's role

You may be surprised at how much your students miss you when they go off to college. So often they begin their sentences with, “My teacher back home . . .” When they contact you, whether by phone, instant messaging, text messaging, or email, be sure to respond with words of encouragement. You are as much a part of their support system as their parents. If at all possible, visit! You are always welcome in the studios and at performances. I always appreciate meeting that “teacher from home,” because I like to say thank you for your great preparation—and for trusting us with the rest.

