Teaching Is the Greatest of All the Arts: A Journal of My First Year as a Dance Educator

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Abstract

My first year teaching at a charter school in Harlem was full of surprises and revelations. I found I had to wear many different hats to suit different situations and meet each child’s needs. I also found that I had to be flexible to change directions in a planned lesson, and that there is much, much more to teaching dance than just knowing how to dance. Most of all, I found that I love teaching. Watching my students grow and develop is the most rewarding experience I can imagine.

Students at Global Community Charter School. Photo credit: Lauren Panzica.
This was my first year teaching dance full time to grades K through 3 in a charter school in Harlem in New York City. It was full of surprises, discovery, inspiration, and so much growth in myself and my students. What follows are some of the lessons I learned along the way.

**OCTOBER 9, 2014**

Welcome to the World of Hats. In my first few weeks of teaching I have discovered the countless hats we as teachers wear every day. See below for the descriptions of the hats I wear in my classroom.

**Actor:** This hat makes you look crazy to the average adult but if you can speak in different accents; sing (even if not well); and change your speed, movement, and face in a split second, you can get 90 percent of the students’ attention fixated on you. Changing your voice from a Southern girl, to an Australian crocodile hunter, to a high-pitched baby girl, to an English chap in one class will create an atmosphere where students will WANT to listen to you.

**Parent:** This hat might be the hardest hat to wear because you play all roles and, depending on the circumstances, fill in roles that might not be present in students’ lives. This hat has to speak truth even when it hurts and has to communicate effectively with parents and guardians to give them a real picture of their child in my classroom. It also has to love despite behavior and give consequences although loving unconditionally.

**Ms. Fix-It:** This hat gets a lot of use. There’s a constant stream of “problems” that enter every class, from killing an insect, which students picture as a velociraptor, to getting to the root of bullying that you see right before your eyes.

**Director of Security:** In addition to eyes all around, this hat has a unique special power called “thank you.” One way to fix unwanted behavior is to notice, thank, and reward the students who are listening and waiting for instructions. Unwanted behavior can become an ever-increasing epidemic, but we have the opportunity to develop our own culture in our classroom that hopefully overflows into the rest of students’ lives. Easier said than done—I never realized how much TIME and RAPT ATTENTON that takes from the teacher. Now I know what my mom meant when she said, “I don’t want to say it again; don’t make me repeat myself.” I have found that most students want to behave well but naturally have different levels of willpower to make good choices. It is my job to embody the respectful stance that I want my students to emulate in regard to each other and me. It is also my job to make sure all students are safe, and this requires following our class pledge of promises (also known as class “rules”) and enforcing consequences if the pledge is broken.

**Socrates, the Great Questioner:** The activity of show and tell does not apply to teachers. Our job is to show and ask instead of tell. I always start class with a question. My students’ language is more understood by their peers than my language. I made up an acronym to help them speak their language positively.

- **SWAG = Share your life, Wonder, Ambition, Gratitude**
- **In the SWAG unit, I asked “What is something you wonder?” Here are some of my students’ answers:**
  - “How can you be a grown-up?”
  - “If I can take a shower.”
  - “If I’m going to get superpowers.”
  - “How grown-ups have babies.”
  - “How phones work under water.”
  - “If I can be the sky.”

Then we expressed these ideas by creating a dance to the song called “Swag It Out.”

**NOVEMBER 3, 2014**

I am learning more from my students every day and more how to think quickly and adjust my planned lessons on the spot. The things I have learned recently: apparently I’m not a real teacher because according to Nyiesha in third grade, all teachers have to have boyfriends, and I do not. I also learned I should find a husband on the Internet, that I look like a teenager, my hair is entertaining, that I look like Ariana Grande, and that I am viewed as a mother. I love kids!!

Most important, I learned that in-classroom and out-of-classroom relationships are very different. The dynamic of a large group brings out particular behaviors that are not present in one-on-one relationships. Things are said, humorous or serious, affections are shown, and passion is given a jolt when one on one. Having one hour with a small group of two or three students can accomplish more than in a full class. The divider between teacher and student is decreased, and while they know your position, and recognize your authority, the conversation is entirely different. The dynamic of small-group settings allows you to see your students for who they really are, not who the theory of the larger group makes them to be. This is one reason why I love field trips where I get to interact with smaller groups.

**DECEMBER 12, 2014**

My mom gave me a little sign I keep on my desk that says, “Teaching is the greatest of all the arts.” It absolutely is. Teaching is an art—no matter the subject, the creative process is encountered every day in every lesson. Problem solving, breaking down concepts, thinking of 1,000 new ways to reach one student, communicating with engaging activities, and staying focused on the greater vision are all paralleled in an artist’s life. If teaching is the greatest of all the arts, then teaching the arts is particularly unique in the creative process. Creative arts teachers are challenged to engage in the creative teaching process, as well as their own specific art form. As adult artists, we have practiced countless hours of
our technique and our imaginations create naturally. The challenge with teaching is that you have to find a way to bring an entire class’s imaginations there with you. The roadblocks along the way are students’ divergent interests, family situations, learning differences, and social and emotional setbacks. It is like trying to get 25 pigeons to fly together like geese! But we do it. We do it every day, all over our city, and all over our world. Out of all the arts, teaching is the greatest—greatest by honor, by challenge, and by influence. I need to constantly remind myself of the greatness of what we do and why. The creative process never stops, that is why it is a process. Our minds are turned on and rarely shut off.

As an artist, I have learned to never give up on myself; as a teacher, I have learned to never give up on someone else. As an artist, I have learned to practice even if I do not want to; as a teacher, I have learned how to inspire good work ethic in others. As an artist, I have tried to “fix myself” to be a better dancer and choreographer; as a teacher, I have realized that I cannot fix every situation, but I will do my best.

FEBRUARY 16, 2015

Teaching dance as a creative art is more about teaching how to listen, follow directions, gain self-control of body and mouth, and initiating activities that tap into their creativity more than just teaching a fun dance. As dance teachers, we have the ability to reach students who other teachers might not be able to reach. This is related to the subject matter and
the wonderful experiential nature of dance. It gives some students the chance to succeed and accomplish something when learning in other subject areas might be much more fraught with anxiety.

**APRIL 20, 2015**

I recently returned from a trip to Haiti in which I partnered with two creative arts programs, and I was able to teach, and learn the administrative and creative aspects and approaches of how they run their programs. On my return, I integrated Creole and brought my students into the reality of these Haitian students. I contemplated not sharing about the harsh realities of poverty because my students are all from inner-city Harlem and the Bronx and do not have much according to United States standards. However, this was probably the best unit of my year so far. My students learned that just by living in the United States, they already have it much better than my friends in Haiti. They have access to iPads, phones, the Internet, heat and air conditioning; they don’t live on $2 a day and do have family members present in their lives who provide for them daily. We shared videos back and forth with our Haitian friends, and their gratitude was increased to the point where they now want to take action to raise money to send and one day go to visit them. I realized, as teachers, we are part of the equation, but not the complete answer. We discussed the quote “Your attitude is a box of crayons that color your world,” and questions like “What can you do to make the world better?” and “What are you thankful for?” Each grade reacted differently to the harsh realities of our friends in Haiti, but it was encouraging to see their own sparks of inspiration of how we can help. The first project was to send a dance video!

**JUNE 4, 2015**

Most likely if you are a teacher, you’re in the same boat as me called “Control Freak.” We sail away on daily endeavors to conquer the pirates of Land of Laziness, Disaster Distractions, and the Island of I Didn’t Do It. We take our young mates aboard and implore them to keep all hands and feet inside the vehicle at all times and IF they don’t, they will miss their Ram-bunctious Recess quicker than we can say “Ahoy, Matey.” But the scariest part of being the captain is allowing your sailors to conquer the pirates without you and to steer the ship. The treasure we seek is the equipping of our mates to do this without us. Class presentations, music and dance performances, musicals, and end-of-the-year shenanigans are a perfect example of letting go of the wheel and letting them steer. You have to let go, and allow the mates to exercise everything.
you have taught them; when you do, they will surprise you. Yes, they will make mistakes, and yes, they will do things you never expected, but it will be okay. There is something special in the moments of performance. It is time you can never get back, and the experience is never the same watching it after the fact on video. Live performance creates an interesting circle between performers and observers, and the atmosphere is rich. It is those moments you cannot control, where your shipmates discover something new about themselves, about life, about others, and you did not teach them that. However, you guided the experience, which enabled it to happen. As teachers, it is our nature to control, but we need to let our students fly.

LAST DAY OF SCHOOL

My first year of being a full-time dance teacher in an elementary school has come to a close. I know my journey has just begun, and I hope my experiences have inspired you to keep doing what you are doing: impacting young students every day. We have the greatest job in the world. To educate in a creative kinesthetic setting should never be taken for granted. Let’s break out of our boxes, do things we have never done before, and take our students on a journey they will never forget. I cannot wait to start my new year of teaching in September!

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