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Teaching Philosophy

In this statement, I frame my teaching in the following ways: building warm classroom environments and my view of the roles of student and teacher, commitments in teaching forms of the African Diaspora as a white educator, teaching methods, and experience serving diverse populations. I am passionate and experienced in teaching jazz, tap, and musical theatre dance technique courses, as well as dance pedagogy and dance history (with specializations in jazz and musical theatre dance). My professional preparation also includes movement for actors, choreography, improvisation, contemporary technique, somatics/wellness, and general education coursework.

I create a warm atmosphere by carefully building rapport with students. It is vital that each student feels welcomed, seen, and heard in my classroom and rehearsal spaces. Students bring value to the classroom; the teacher, as the designated authority figure, is not the only one with knowledge to share and students deserve to be allowed and empowered to bring themselves fully into the room. I acknowledge their responsibility in contributing to the environment and classroom experience for themselves and their peers. Along these lines, an important goal across any pedagogical space is valuing students as people, not just as dancers. Seeing the whole person and acknowledging that students are impacted by things that happen outside the room feels integral to my teaching style and values. Helping students learn to be functional and healthy humans is my main goal, as well as – of course – pursuing excellence in the art of dance. Prioritizing and valuing embodied knowledge, I frame opportunities for students to listen to and honor the knowledge they bring to the space. I sometimes begin my classes with a mindfulness practice in order to provide a moment for rest and reflection, and encourage mind-body integration through guided awareness utilizing breath.

Within the context of jazz pedagogy specifically, I am committed, as a white woman, to honoring the roots of the form and acknowledging the historical and cultural context of the form's lineage. I ground my jazz classroom in African aesthetic values, such as improvisation, musicality, and the interrelationship between individuals and the community. Each class starts in a circle, establishing a clear difference in value and form from Eurocentric traditions. My jazz practice is influenced by the vernacular, codified forms, as well as contemporary practices in musical theatre and precision jazz. Finding ways to honor historical and cultural contexts is also integral to my course planning. I prioritize discussions of where the forms come from and who developed them, especially acknowledging practitioners often ignored by the traditional academic canon. Additionally, I prioritize jazz music in classes focused on jazz dance, and intentionally cultivate playlists showcasing a variety of musicians and time periods.

I work to incorporate a variety of teaching methods centering on clear expectations and feedback, drawing from my unique background in Secondary Education (B.S., Penn State University). I offer strong skills from my formal training, including: clear and explicit communication, planning (across overarching curriculum, units, and individual lessons, as well as assessments), smoothly navigating transitions during class, staying flexible and adjusting in the moment based on overarching course objectives/values (as well as

planning ahead for such adjustments), and incorporating both literacy and writing skills across disciplines. I incorporate a variety of learning styles in my classroom by encouraging students to engage with information in a variety of ways: reading, viewing, listening, writing, and verbal discussions, in addition to physical practice activities. Additionally, I implement strategies that benefit all students. One major take-away from the Special Education coursework at Penn State University is that strategies benefiting students with differing abilities usually benefit *all* students. For example: explaining the trajectory of class at the beginning, clear cueing in transitions, and providing clear instructions in multiple formats (verbal, written, pictorial, etc.), facilitate positive classroom experiences for students. Furthermore, taking a process-oriented approach to choreography allows students to utilize their unique skills and encourages them to speak up for their needs in a rehearsal context. By process-oriented, I mean a shift in my awareness to the specific participants in the space and a negotiation of their needs while upholding my choreographic intentions in a malleable way. I approach choreography from a collaborative perspective that involves a great deal of coaching and direction; while I prepare material beforehand, my work is adaptive based on who is in the room participating in the experience.

I have been fortunate to teach a diverse student body through my experiences in higher education thus far, including students with diverse lived experiences of race, class, gender, sexual identity expression, and disability. Providing accommodations for students, as needed, supports positive interactions with dance as a practice for all students, regardless of their situation or ability. One of the formative learning experiences during my first year of graduate school was accommodating a student with severe medical issues into my Jazz 1 course at the University at Buffalo. Meeting his inability to physically participate in the class with accommodations (rather than forcing him to withdraw), while challenging and time consuming, ultimately allowed him to successfully complete the course. Shifting his participation to an observational format, and grading written reflections on these class observations as well as additional reading and viewing material, allowed him to encounter dance in a positive way despite his temporarily limited ability. This encounter inspired me to rethink what is considered “practicable” for accommodations in physical practice courses. I recently worked with another student facing significant health challenges in my role as an adjunct instructor at SUNY Fredonia, and have continued to offer creative solutions, including extended deadlines for assignments and video options for her to film her performance for feedback when she was physically able.

In sum, I create a warm environment where students are welcome to participate as valued community members. I choose to value inclusion, and employ strategies that foster wellness for dance students, teaching skills that support them both as people and as artists. My focus on jazz pedagogy is framed within the context of African aesthetic values and an open acknowledgement of the complex history of the form. Ultimately, as the formal authority figure in the room, I serve students by providing opportunities and skillsets that empower them to take ownership of their own learning journeys both within and beyond my classroom or rehearsal spaces.