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Teaching Philosophy

In this statement, I frame my teaching in the following ways: 1. Building warm classroom environments and my view of the roles of student and teacher, 2. My teaching methods and experience, and 3. My commitments in teaching forms from the African Diaspora as a white educator. I am primarily interested in teaching jazz, tap, and musical theatre dance technique courses, as well as dance pedagogy. I would also gladly teach dance history, somatics, movement for actors, and general education coursework.

I create a warm atmosphere by carefully building rapport with students. It is important to me that each student feels welcomed, seen, and heard in my classroom and rehearsal spaces. I recognize the value students bring 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 I inhabit 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 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.

I work to incorporate a variety of teaching methods centering on clear expectations and feedback. I bring a unique background to dance instruction in that I have a B.S. in Secondary Education from Penn State University; I offer strong skills from my formal training. For example: clear and explicit communication, planning (across overarching curriculum, units, and individual lessons, as well as assessments), smoothly navigating transitions during class, deploying classroom management strategies, staying flexible and adjusting in the moment based on overarching course objectives/values (as well as planning ahead for such adjustments), and incorporating literacy/writing skills across disciplines. Additionally, I am committed to providing accommodations for students, as needed, in order to support positive interactions with dance as a practice for all students, regardless of their situation or ability.

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 work to ground my jazz classroom in African aesthetic values, such as improvisation, musicality, and the interrelationship between individuals and the community. I start each class in a circle, establishing a clear difference in value and form from Euro-centric practices. My jazz practice is influenced by the vernacular (particularly movement from the Swing Era), codified forms (such as Giordano technique), as well as contemporary practices in musical theatre and precision jazz.

In sum, I create a warm environment where students are welcome to participate as valued community members. I seek to 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 seek to serve students by providing opportunities and skillsets that empower them to take ownership of their own learning journeys.

DEI Statement

My commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion manifests through my classroom and rehearsal practices, and a personal commitment to continue my own education and professional development.

As a white educator teaching forms of the African Diaspora, namely jazz and tap, honoring historical and cultural contexts is 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. In teaching Jazz Dance Technique 1 at the University at Buffalo, I included units focused on the Ring Shout, Jazz Music and Vernacular Dance in the Swing Era, Codified Forms, as well as Musical Theatre. I incorporated a wide variety of authors in the class's reading materials, and selected viewing materials as well to provide different modalities for encountering information. Additionally, I am committed to prioritizing jazz music in classes focused on jazz dance, and worked to intentionally cultivate a playlist showcasing a variety of musicians and time periods.

Beyond diversifying the materials in my jazz and tap coursework – as well as providing opportunities to encounter forms of the African Diaspora within the course itself – I also work to incorporate a variety of learning styles in my classroom. As mentioned previously, I encourage students to engage with information in a variety of ways: reading, viewing, listening, writing, and verbal discussions. Furthermore, one of the formative learning experiences during my first year of graduate school was accommodating a student with severe medical issues into my Jazz Dance Technique 1 course. Meeting his inability to physically participate in the class with accommodations (rather than forcing him to resign from the course, as my department recommended), 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.

Additionally, I implement strategies that benefit all students. One of the major take-aways from my Special Education coursework at Penn State University as part of my degree in Secondary Education, is that strategies that benefit 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.

Finally, taking a process-oriented approach to choreography allows students to utilize their unique skills and encourages them to speak up for their unique 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 have moved away from the practice of exclusively preparing detailed choreography beforehand and teaching it step by step. Now, I approach choreography from a more 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. This philosophy impacts my work in theatre as well; approaching theatre and musical theatre students with their needs and abilities in mind allows me to support their experience and the success of our ultimate final product. While the context of theatrical productions, even in an education setting, often comes with the limitation of tight timeframes, I am committed to bringing the same attention to student experience by upholding student choice as a priority in these spaces, as well as in concert dance settings.

In sum, while I acknowledge that I am not an expert in every aspect of DEI work, I endeavor to continue encountering new information, strategies, and studies to enhance my knowledge and further improve my ability to craft safe and effective classroom and rehearsal environments in a dance education setting.