

Dance skills



About this free course

Find out more about studying with The Open University by [visiting our online prospectus](#).

This version of the content may include video, images and interactive content that may not be optimised for your device.

You can experience this free course as it was originally designed on OpenLearn, the home of free learning from The Open University:

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/education/dance-skills/content-section-0>.

There you'll also be able to track your progress via your activity record, which you can use to demonstrate your learning.

The Open University

Walton Hall, Milton Keynes

MK7 6AA

Copyright © 2016 The Open University

Intellectual property

Unless otherwise stated, this resource is released under the terms of the Creative Commons Licence v4.0 http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.en_GB. Within that The Open University interprets this licence in the following way:

www.open.edu/openlearn/about-openlearn/frequently-asked-questions-on-openlearn. Copyright and rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons Licence are retained or controlled by The Open University. Please read the full text before using any of the content.

We believe the primary barrier to accessing high-quality educational experiences is cost, which is why we aim to publish as much free content as possible under an open licence. If it proves difficult to release content under our preferred Creative Commons licence (e.g. because we can't afford or gain the clearances or find suitable alternatives), we will still release the materials for free under a personal end-user licence.

This is because the learning experience will always be the same high quality offering and that should always be seen as positive – even if at times the licensing is different to Creative Commons.

When using the content you must attribute us (The Open University) (the OU) and any identified author in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons Licence.

The Acknowledgements section is used to list, amongst other things, third party (Proprietary), licensed content which is not subject to Creative Commons licensing. Proprietary content must be used (retained) intact and in context to the content at all times.

The Acknowledgements section is also used to bring to your attention any other Special Restrictions which may apply to the content. For example there may be times when the Creative Commons Non-Commercial Sharealike licence does not apply to any of the content even if owned by us (The Open University). In these instances, unless stated otherwise, the content may be used for personal and non-commercial use.

We have also identified as Proprietary other material included in the content which is not subject to Creative Commons Licence. These are OU logos, trading names and may extend to certain photographic and video images and sound recordings and any other material as may be brought to your attention.

Unauthorised use of any of the content may constitute a breach of the terms and conditions and/or intellectual property laws.

We reserve the right to alter, amend or bring to an end any terms and conditions provided here without notice.

All rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons licence are retained or controlled by The Open University.

Head of Intellectual Property, The Open University

Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
1 Safe dance practice	6
1.1 Safety and dance	6
1.2 The warm up	6
1.3 Warm-up activities	6
1.4 Myths and facts	7
2 Posture, alignment and balance	8
3 Dance combinations	9
4 Performance skills	9
5 Giving feedback	10
Conclusion	11
Keep on learning	11
References	12
Acknowledgements	12

Introduction

Dance communicates ideas through movement and is an expressive art form. Students need to learn how to use their body in a safe and healthy way, whilst developing a wide-ranging movement vocabulary. This unit introduces some key skills and suggestions for how to develop these skills with students.

The use of different dance techniques can be an effective way of building vocabulary and developing different kinds of skills and abilities. Technical dance skills can form the foundation on which to develop and enhance each individual's performance.

As dance teachers, we may have a range of skills, but it isn't always possible to possess expertise in every type of dance style and technique.

Find out more about studying with The Open University by [visiting our online prospectus](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand and have practical experience of creating opportunities for learners to develop dance skills
- understand safe dance practice
- understand and have practical experience of giving feedback
- promote discussion and debate about dance issues throughout the dance curriculum.

1 Safe dance practice

1.1 Safety and dance

Interactive content is not available in this format.

As with other physical activities, consideration must be given to aspects of safety when teaching dance. Safety is paramount and should underpin all dance education.

Here is a checklist of basic safety procedures that dance teachers frequently endorse. Can you identify others for your particular teaching situation or context?

- The body should be free of all jewellery and watches, including navel piercings.
- Bare feet are required to prevent slipping.
- Appropriate clothing should be worn that allows freedom of movement and which is free from zips, buttons or buckles that could cause harm.
- Long hair should be tied back from the face to prevent it falling into the eyes whilst moving.

1.2 The warm up

The importance of an effective warm up to prepare the body for physical exertion cannot be emphasised enough.

Warm-up activities for dance should:

- mobilise the joints;
- increase the internal temperature of the body;
- increase the heart rate and blood flow to the muscles;
- make the muscles warm and pliable;
- increase the range of movement around the joints;
- increase the speed of transmission of nerve impulses;
- prepare the mind, as well as the body, by focusing on oneself.

1.3 Warm-up activities

A variety of actions might be included in warm-up activities, and there is good reason for keeping these simple and repetitive. If the brain and muscles have to concentrate on learning new and complex patterns of movement, then this takes attention away from raising the core body temperature by 1 or 2 degrees and increasing the heart rate enough to perspire.

Movements might include:

- walks gradually increasing in speed to a small run;
- shoulder rolls, arm circles and simple stretches of the torso and arms;
- gentle flexions (extreme flexions should be avoided in warm-up activities), extensions and rotation of the joints, including knee bends (plié);
- movement of the torso in all directions, swings and sitting rolls;
- simple continuous patterns of movement to increase the pulse rate and warm the body.

The benefits of an effective warm up are that:

- The body will be prepared for movements needing speed, strength and more complex neuromuscular co-ordination.
- Oxygen will reach muscles more efficiently and this will aid muscle contraction and relaxation.
- The body and mind will be prepared to concentrate.

All of the above help to minimise the risk of injury.

1.4 Myths and facts

Myth – Warming up and being warm are the same thing.

Fact – Warming up the body requires physical movement that should gradually increase in speed and intensity over a period of around 15 minutes.

Myth – It has to hurt to be doing any good.

Fact – Pain can often be a warning sign that the body has gone too far – students should learn to listen to their bodies and interpret the signs in order to avoid pushing themselves too far.

Myth – Dancers can never be too flexible.

Fact – Too much flexibility in the joints can lead to injury if dancers do not have adequate strength in the muscles surrounding the joints.

Activity 1

Identify the similarities and differences between what is recommended in the main narrative above and your own practice in the teaching of dance. Then design an effective sequence of warm-up activities in an appropriate dance style.

Try this sequence out in class and ask for feedback from the students on aspects that you will be able to evaluate, for example on whether it has increased their heart rate or made them feel warm.

For further information about health and safety for dance, click on 'view document' below to read **Warming Up and Cooling Down** and visit the Dance UK website.

[view document](#)

2 Posture, alignment and balance

Posture and alignment are the key to balance and moving through space. It can be tempting to overlook such things when faced with 25 students, of whom a third want to do a routine to their favourite chart song, another third want to have a go at breakdance, and the other third would rather sit and watch everyone else!

Posture and alignment are fundamental to dancing, just as they are to other kinds of physical activities, such as martial arts. Learning how to hold and move the body in alignment is something that is beneficial throughout life, and not just in a dance class.

Students need to become aware of their alignment through feeling and not just through looking, although being able to see the changes in the body through the use of mirrors is helpful to start with.

As teachers, we need to guide the students' alignment through the use of general and individual verbal prompts, imagery and, where appropriate, the use of touch. A light touch, for example using the fingertips to demonstrate lengthening in the lower back or to prevent the shoulders from dropping behind the line of the hip bones, can make all the difference to some students.

Developing this kind of body awareness will help students to balance, to recover safely from off balance, and to move the body through space.

Balance is all about holding the body still and using opposing muscular energies to achieve this. But, if the head, upper torso and pelvis are out of alignment, then this places unequal stress on muscles, ligaments and joints. The body will tire easily and it will become difficult to maintain balance.

The centre of gravity for a dancer is in the pelvis, just below the navel. It is important to try to keep the line of gravity within the base of the support to help the body's stability.

The body is more stable when the centre of gravity is lower and the base of support larger. However, dancers usually want to balance on precariously small supports, such as the ball of one foot, and so the body will be less stable in this position. This is why body awareness is crucial.

When we are maintaining a balanced state we are using our:

- **eyes** for visual clues;
- **middle ear** for our sense of equilibrium;
- **receptors** in our joints and muscles.

Balance is a skill that can be developed and needs body awareness, practice, muscular tension, control, concentration, focus, strength and stamina.

Activity 2

Click 'view document' below to read the article '**Dance Science**' by Rachel Rist (1991). Identify the points that you are familiar with and the developments that you were unaware of. Reflect on whether any of this information will impact upon your practice and, if so, in what way(s).

[view document](#)

3 Dance combinations

Movement and dance combinations enable students to make physical sense of the exercises and movement material that they are given in class on a regular basis. In dance, repetition and recapitulation are vital ingredients in the learning process, and so being presented with phrases of movement that progress and develop in complexity will allow the individual to progress and develop too.

Did you know that it takes around 180 repetitions of a movement for the muscle memory to retain that particular pattern?

The **purposes** of dance combinations are:

- to increase and develop movement vocabulary;
- to develop movement and muscle memory;
- to increase the range of movement;
- to increase and develop understanding of physical capabilities;
- to develop an awareness of anatomical principles;
- to increase mobility in the body;
- to improve co-ordination and performance skills.

Activity 3

Create a simple dance combination based on movements and exercises that you have taught in class.

Keep it short, around 16 counts, to start with, and then add more movements that expand on what has gone before and that will develop specific aspects of your students' abilities.

Teach this combination over a period of 4–6 weeks, adding more movements each time. Keep a progress log to evaluate any developments made.

4 Performance skills

Performance skills are those aspects that set dancing apart from mechanical movement. Often, our attention is drawn to the dancer who is using a range of performance skills effectively, because they stand out from the rest.

Performance skills are aspects such as:

- focus;
- projection;
- musicality;
- timing;
- emphasis;
- expression.

All of these aspects are connected to the way in which a dancer interprets the movements and the meaning of a dance. Some of these may be prescribed by the choreographer, for example where the focus should be at a given moment.

These skills can be taught in class through the medium of the simple dance combination. If students understand from the outset that dancing combinations of movements is the process through which they learn how to perform, then their performance skills are less likely to be elements that are added on once the movements have been learnt.

Activity 4

Watch the video sequence, taken from **White Man Sleeps**, several times and make a note of the performance skills that are identifiable.

Video content is not available in this format.

Use a similar activity in class with your students. Select an extract from an appropriate professional dance work and ask the students to identify any performance skills that they might have focused on in practical lessons.

5 Giving feedback

In order to develop and improve dance skills, students should also be involved in evaluating one another's, and their own, work.

Performing for one another in class as part of an evaluation and feedback process can be beneficial to both the students and teacher.

When done on a regular basis, students can become less self-conscious about performing in front of others; this is important in terms of building confidence in young performers.

Feedback is an important part of the improvement process because it can provide statements and questions that enable the students to see their own work with an outside eye.

Once engaged in the evaluation and feedback process, students will be developing skills in **observing**, **listening** and **applying** comments to their work – in the same way that they do in the choreographic process.

Feedback can come from the teacher or fellow students – and through the use of a video camera.

Giving written feedback can be done in a variety of ways, ranging from using a simple blank piece of paper to a more complex pro forma. It all depends on what you want to focus on at that point in time.

Activity 5

Click 'view document' below to download your own printable blank performance skills feedback sheet.

[view document](#)

Use this document as a starting point to design your own feedback sheet, addressing the elements of performance skills for a particular group you are working with.

Click 'view document' below to read Giving helpful feedback: performance
view document

To see a completed example performance skills feedback sheet of the kind you could use with your students, click 'view document' below.

view document

Conclusion

This unit has highlighted some of the fundamental aspects of dance skills, and given you ideas as to what to include and possible approaches to developing such skills in class. It has also looked at the development of performance skills and the use of feedback. You might like to use the Unit Forum to discuss and debate any dance-related issues, share ideas or ask questions.

Further reading

Dance UK, 'Warming Up and Cooling Down', Information Sheet 3, Articles by Caroline Marsh.

Keep on learning



Study another free course

There are more than **800 courses on OpenLearn** for you to choose from on a range of subjects.

Find out more about all our [free courses](#).

Take your studies further

Find out more about studying with The Open University by [visiting our online prospectus](#).

If you are new to university study, you may be interested in our [Access Courses](#) or [Certificates](#).

What's new from OpenLearn?

[Sign up to our newsletter](#) or view a sample.

For reference, full URLs to pages listed above:

OpenLearn – www.open.edu/openlearn/free-courses

Visiting our online prospectus – www.open.ac.uk/courses

Access Courses – www.open.ac.uk/courses/do-it/access

Certificates – www.open.ac.uk/courses/certificates-he

Newsletter –

www.open.edu/openlearn/about-openlearn/subscribe-the-openlearn-newsletter

References

Davies, S. *White Man Sleeps*, performed by Siobhan Davies Dance Company.

Rist, R. (1991) 'Dance Science', *The Dancing Times*, December 1991, p. 243.

Acknowledgements

Amanda Burrows is a graduate of Laban and gained an MA in Education from The Open University. She has taught dance in secondary schools, FE colleges, universities and in community settings. Amanda is currently Head of Curriculum for Visual, Performing Arts and Media at Grantham College, and has produced materials for the Open University's Teachandlearn.net, repurposed here for openlearn.

Except for third party materials and otherwise stated (see [terms and conditions](#)), this content is made available under a

[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 Licence](#)

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources for permission to reproduce material in this unit:

All photos by Fausto Dorelli, from Cohan, R. 'The Dance Workshop', 1986. Gaia Books Ltd., Octopus Publishing, Hamlyn.

Rist, R. 'Dance Science', *Dancing Times*, December 1991.

Every effort has been made to contact copyright owners. If any have been inadvertently overlooked, the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

Don't miss out:

If reading this text has inspired you to learn more, you may be interested in joining the millions of people who discover our free learning resources and qualifications by visiting The Open University - www.open.edu/openlearn/free-courses