

Form Follows Function - Pedagogical Paper

“Understanding the underlying principles is fundamental to understanding the movements.”

Mabel Elsworth Todd (1937, p.7)

It is widely recognised in the dance industry that ballet is challenging. Performing even a single exercise can lead to a lengthy list of corrections for teachers to provide to their students. But how much information can a student realistically absorb in one class? To understand the mechanics of a movement whether it being technique, choreographic or improvisation, it is beneficial for a dancer to learn about the interrelatedness of sensing, feeling, thinking and acting while becoming aware of the internal and external processes associated with the particular movement. In her book *Ballet Beyond Tradition*, Anna Paskevaska states how “The most important aspect of teaching dance is to provide students with a kinetic experience to bring concepts alive and to allow for ownership of the sensation created” (2005, p. 11) To deliver just “one focus” to a class may consequently appear at first a challenge for the teacher, however becoming a handy tool for class structure.

How can a teacher communicate "one concept" effectively? It is difficult to isolate just one concept as a sole topic for a class, as only one exercise usually has several aspects for the student to focus on that either facilitate the execution of the exercise or give it a specific quality. To structure a class around one specific focus I believe it is useful to first:

- Look at the chosen concept and search for what pedagogical tools and principles that can be used to support the specific topic.
- How to transfer the concept into exercises.
- Develop the class structure around the "one focus." Consider which muscles or body parts need to be activated, strengthened, and concentrated on to support the specific theme of the class.

Searching for methods, principles and use of vocabulary becomes the next task. How can one deliver and captivate the student's attention without deviating from the sole topic of the class.

Case Study

The following case study was a ballet class taught for the first year Bachelor students at the Institute of Dance Arts (IDA), Anton Bruckner Private University. The primary aim of this study was to demonstrate didactic concepts within a 90-minute class. My aim as the teacher was to search for one focus and to utilise principles, methods and concepts that would reinforce the class topic while enhancing the students' physical and cognitive skills.

The Focus of the Class

Upper-body: In particular the ribcage/sternum and its connection with the shoulder girdle. How the sternum can be transported between weight shifts. How correct engagement of the shoulder girdle not only enhances the lines of the *port de bras* but also the arms co-ordination with movement.

Important note: This focus is to be addressed to the students at the beginning of the class.

Concepts/Vocabulary that support the Focus of the Class

- **Scooping Shoulder Blades**, alignment of the shoulder girdle, and a tool for the student to avoid pinching the shoulder blades together.
- **Side-Body-Long**, lengthening sensation between the hips and underarms together with **connecting energy lines** between the shoulders and opposing hips. Side-Body-Long connects the torso to help stop the ribcage from opening and the shoulder blades squeezing together.
- **Spiral Paths** of the arms. An imagery that helps engage the upper back and activates energy through the *ports de bras*.
- **Breath**, allow breath to help initiate movement and to create space between the joints
- **Mobility** of Thoracic spine. A counter action from over extension of the upper body.
- **Counter tensions** and **oppositional pulls** with **connecting energy lines** through the body.

The Class Structure

The following table illustrates the process I worked through to develop the **Upper-body** ballet class. The objective was to integrate the main topic with significant movement and steps throughout the class exercises. Steps I chose to emphasis the transport and alignment of the upper body were repetitively integrated throughout the exercises, either with different directions or varied speeds. Such steps were *temps le aits*, *chasse*, changing of the gesture leg within an exercise, balances, *ports de bras* and *chasse pas de bourrées*. The next step was to incorporate concepts, principles, or methods (see topics in the table below) as corrections, explanations, and tools for the students to apply in practice.

Class Topic – “Upper- Body”		
Exercises	Movements to emphasis one concept	Topics to discuss
Plie	Mobility of the thoracic spine Contractions of the upper body with <i>demi plies</i> Waking up the joints with <i>ports de bras</i> Balance in each position	Creating space Yawning joints - send your breath into the joints space . Organise alignment in the balances; Opposition Pull
Tendu	Introducing weight shifts <i>temps le ait</i> in each position and changing of the working leg with <i>tendu</i>	Transport the upper body with the <i>temps le ait</i> . Allow the spine to slightly shift through the transferences of weight.
Glisse	Similar pattern to <i>tendu</i> exercise Continuing with weight shifts Arms remain in 2 nd position for awareness of shoulder girdles engagement. Balance in <i>retire</i>	Allow the spine to slightly shift through the transferences of weight. Arms: Scooping shoulder blades Balance: Connecting energy lines between the <i>passé</i> leg and opposing shoulder.
Ronds De Jambe	Continuing with weight shifts Mobility of thoracic spine with contractions during <i>ronds de jambe</i> to explore the elasticity of the ribcage <i>Ronds de Jambe enlair</i> , to increase awareness of upper body placement Balance in <i>arabesque</i>	Side-Body-Long ; particularly during <i>ronds de jambe enlair</i> Actively engaging the oppositional pulls within the body. Allow subtle shift of the sternum as the leg moves from front, side and back.
Grandbattement	Weights Shifts ; <i>temps le ait</i> , <i>chasse pas de bouree</i> away from and towards the barre.	Side-Body-Long Scooping Shoulder Blades Feel the shoulders relax as you initiate the <i>grandbattement</i> .

		Release the ribcage downwards as the leg goes up. Connecting energy lines Oppositional pulls
Centre Tendu/Glisse	Similar exercise as <i>tendu</i> and <i>glisse</i> at the barre with weight shift through <i>temps le aits</i> <i>Ports de bras</i> becoming more complex to enhance attention to the upper body and its coordination with the legs. Introducing single <i>pirouettes</i>	Side-Body-Long Imagery ; Eyes widening the back. An eye between the shoulder blades and an eye at the lumbar spine. The eyes are open and look out into the space. Opening and widening sensation. Pirouette: Spiral dynamics , arms have spiralling sensation .
Pirouette	Using the space of studio to challenge the upper body placement through the complex weight shifts with: <i>chasse pas de bouree</i> , <i>waltzes</i> and <i>soutenu</i> turns	Side-Body-Long Scooping Shoulder Blades Spiral dynamics of the arms Connecting the line of energy between the <i>passé</i> leg and opposing shoulder.
Allegro	Introducing complex weights shifts to challenge the upper body placement and arm coordination with use of: <i>chasse pas de bouree</i> , <i>assemble porte</i> , <i>glissade</i> and <i>petit jete</i> .	Scooping Shoulder Blades Suspend A tense upper body/shoulder girdle will cause the spine and ribcage to be less elastic , therefore decreasing the height of the jump. Coordinate the swing of the arms with the push-off of the legs. Breath to help initiate/enhance the movement

Reflection

Introducing and building on basic principles of alignment and functionality involved within a specific topic can become challenging at first but very rewarding when thoughts and actions turn into results. In the past I always implemented several concepts into one class focusing from the arms to the legs, to the pelvis and then onto the usage of arms and presentation depending on the exercise given. A class needs to have a consistent rhythm and should progress through a series of exercises without excessive interruptions or overly varied information. Structuring a class around one topic allows students to focus and engage more intrinsically. Anna Peskevskaya describes very well how:

It can almost become a game to find a concept embedded in a combination, to see how the awareness of the concept impacts on the execution of the step or pose, and enhances the perception of the movements. (2002, p.11)

A noticeable shift in the students' approach to the exercises was evident in their execution during this case study. As their understanding of the concepts deepened, their improved alignment, balance, and the expansiveness of their movement reflected how form follows function: when the correct principles and techniques are applied, the body naturally adapts, and the form of the movement becomes more efficient and expressive. Furthermore, I believe it is essential for any focus to be reinforced across multiple classes to achieve the desired impact on the student.

References:

- Franklin, Eric. *Dance Imagery for Technique and Performance*. Second. USA: Human Kinetics, 1996.
- Paskevskaya, Anna. *Ballet Beyond Tradition*. New York, USA: Routledge, 2005.
- Todd, Mabel Elsworth. *The Thinking Body*. USA: The Gestalt Journal Press, Inc., 1937.