

Out There

Dance in our schools

Physical development is an essential part of the education of young children, which is why movement learning and dance have an important place in schools, says Helen Cameron.

Children are playing, talking, racing around the playground when a minibus pulls up in the primary school carpark. ‘Are you the ballet people?’ a student asks one of the four dancers as they get bags and boxes out of the bus. So begins another day in the life of the dance education program, Out There – The Australian Ballet in schools.

Dance in schools

Dance education programs in primary schools are often limited to an end-of-year performance. In lower-secondary schools, dance might be offered as a short-term elective, while some upper-secondary schools provide dance as a specialist subject with either a specialist school teacher or a private provider.

Additionally, there are several tertiary courses that offer a major in dance performance and dance education for secondary school and studio teachers. Access for primary school teachers to a comprehensive arts education during their tertiary studies is quite limited.

Dance taught to children as a watered-down version of an adult art form has little value. Child-based learning requires identifiable objectives that acknowledge the cognitive, physical and social attributes of various age groups. Children in their formative years, including early, middle and upper childhood, require multisensory learning experiences in order to accommodate their overall development and individual learning preference.

Kinetic learning is fundamental to a child’s development, as it allows an individual to explore, acquire and express mind-and-body coordination skills relevant to all learning. Kinetic learning promotes visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic and verbal-linguistic skills. Teaching strategies that promote investigation, invention and reinforcement provide an opportunity for active learning that is teacher-guided, but with scope for active learning through self-discovery. Learning by imitating someone else has limited impact; while self-discovery learning by doing what your body is able to do has long-term outcomes.

The evolution of the *Out There* program

Since access and equity are key aspects of The Australian Ballet’s business operation, we sought in 2005 to expand our education activities to include school-based dance activities in ways that complement our in-theatre and in-community programs. The provision of a meaningful education programme required the appointment of a person with education and dance expertise, and of dancers with both teaching and performance experience. In addition it meant drawing upon existing personnel, and physical and financial resources in order to develop and deliver a program designed specially for a diverse school population.

Planning and development

Before we developed the in-schools model, we wanted to identify the delivery requirements for a best-practice program. The management of the Ballet acknowledged there was a need to examine topics specific to a school’s requirements that reflected our vision, and motto, ‘Caring for tradition. Daring to be different.’ The next step was my consultation, in 2006, with an array of education, artistic and administrative personnel. The outcomes of the enquiry indicated a broad consensus. Participants agreed that much has been written about the status of arts in the school curriculum, yet we’ve seen little significant change in resources to either support or increase opportunities for dance education in schools.

Participants also identified a series of challenges and barriers to the successful provision of an arts education program, including:

- the crowded curriculum
- the lack of teachers with skills to teach dance with confidence
- the low appeal of dance, particularly for male students
- questions of content relevant to specific dance genres
- the availability of dance professionals with an understanding of how children learn
- the availability of funds to employ specialists, or arrange visits or excursions, and
- the difficulty of access to arts centres for schools in regional but also metropolitan areas.

Participants consistently identified common benchmarks for best practice for a dance program. A best-practice dance program, they said:

- encourages children as active learners rather than passive observers of performance
- engages middle and upper primary students, with a view to provide an informative experience prior to entering secondary school
- contains content relevant for students, regardless of social or cultural background
- distinguishes between teaching methods appropriate in a school context and methods employed in dance training programs
- demystifies ballet and dance, and demonstrate connections with other learning domains
- avoids content with a specific dance genre, in particular, classical ballet, and
- provides youthful role model for students.

Based on the enquiry, the management of the Ballet determined general guidelines for the development of an in-schools program.

From its inception, we acknowledged that the program couldn't be all things to all people. Using the recommendations from the inquiry and management guidelines, we determined that the program should suit students aged between eight and 12 years, and that it should operate as a one-day offering, with:

- workshops that engaged students regardless of gender or previous background in dance
- a discussion forum to give students access to talented dance performers, and
- a performance component that demonstrated a range of dance concepts and genres.

Designing the *Out There* program

The next step was my design of the framework and content, drawing on *Kinetic Sensory Studies: A movement program for young children*, which I co-authored with Dr Diana Kendall in 1986, before we sent the proposed program out for critical feedback.

Key concepts including 'body and spatial awareness,' 'movement invention,' 'kinetic language development' and 'movement memory recall' determined the content and teaching approach employed in the workshops and demonstrations. Beyond this, the aim was also to show that:

- learning dance is for both males and females
- classical ballet is about more than pink tutus, pointe shoes and head-dresses
- dance meets many of the requirements of Health and Physical Education, and
- a classroom teacher can teach a movement program without being trained as a dancer.

The skills required of *Out There* presenters include the ability to communicate, instruct and demonstrate movement dance concepts with confidence to a range of young people who have minimum or no previous dance experience. Our selection criteria for the Dance Education Ensemble who present the program required individual dancers to demonstrate an interest in both teaching and dance performance.

In order to educate and train the presenters, we provided a six-week professional development program that included sessions on lesson planning, clarification and communication exercises, voice coaching, technical conditioning and fitness training, and choreographic engagement with an array of education and dance professionals.

Implementation

Seeding funds from Arts Victoria and several foundations supported the three-year pilot program to get *Out There* into schools in Victoria and New South Wales. Between 2006 and 2009 more than 15,000 students have experienced the program.

We reviewed the pilot program in 2006 and modified the discussion and performance component to make the program accessible to schools without the physical resources to deliver a dance performance – in terms of occupational health and safety requirements.

We reviewed and modified the program again in 2007 to include:

- a 'getting ready' package of dance-related activities that can be undertaken prior to and after the *Out There* visit
- movement workshops led by a male and female dance presenter

- an interactive ‘talking doing dancers’ forum that highlights workshop concepts through an array of dance genres, a look at theatrical dance costumes, and a question-and-answer session
- a certificate of participation for each student, enabling students to reflect on and record their response to the day’s activities while further promoting discussion about dance and dancers, and
- a survey instrument for students and teachers to be administered as a classroom activity that promotes reflective and critical thinking.

So what does it look like?

A wobbly row of 30 chatting boys and girls wait at a gym, library, multipurpose or classroom door. The dance presenters greet the students. There’s curiosity in abundance as the students take off their shoes and socks, and invariably comments like, ‘Ballet? No way,’ ‘Boys don’t do this stuff,’ and, ‘What are we going to do?’ Supervised by classroom teachers, the tentative and watchful students form a circle and the workshop begins.

The movement workshop aims to provide each participant with an active experience that highlights the value of knowing how and why different body parts move, the value of correct posture, the importance of eye alignment for balance and spinning, how to select, remember and experiment with spatial usage, and ways to individually or collectively invent a movement or sequence of movements to make a dance. Students regularly note key language like body position, spotting and spatial placement, and specific exercises like counterbalance and phrases, while teachers monitor their content selection and clarity of instruction so that students have access to a do-able activity.

Anecdotal feedback from observing teachers is one of surprise at the active level of engagement from students who are not usually known for their attentiveness. Teachers comment on the positive impact of active learning offered in the workshop.

Lots of children peep through to the space where the dancers are warming-up for the ‘talking doing dancers’ forum. The bell goes and within minutes those students who have done the movement workshop assemble in the space ready for the forum where they talk with and watch the dancers in action.

The 60-minute session starts with an introduction by each of the four dance presenters about their training and cultural background. The dancers then demonstrate technique, composition design and rhythm through a range of dance genres – classical ballet, contemporary dance, cultural dance and tap. Key words, such as ‘practice,’ ‘inventiveness,’ ‘strength,’ ‘fitness,’ ‘expression’ and ‘enjoyment’ are described and reinforced. They show a small selection of costumes from The Australian Ballet’s wardrobe to the students, with an appreciative response to the tutu from *The Sleeping Beauty* and the headpiece of Ned Kelly from the production of *My Name is Edward Kelly*.

The question-and-answer segment varies from group to group. Common questions include: how old are you; what do dancers eat; do you get paid; can you do the splits; have you had any injuries; and, for the male dancers, have ever dropped a female dancer?

Teacher and student feedback has been overwhelming positive. Letters, emails and drawings from students, and many requests for a return visit, indicate the program is a worthwhile experience for students. Ideally, dance learning encourages students to develop skills with which they can explore and invent, and gain an appreciation of their mind and body as an instrument of physical, aesthetic expression.

As one music teacher put it, ‘(The students) realised the links dance has with so many other aspects of learning – fitness and health, maths, music, memory and teamwork, to name a few. Your ensemble did in one day what I’d been trying to do for the last seven years. Bravo.’

Physical development is an essential part of the education of young children, which is another way of saying that movement learning is fundamental in the curriculum. That’s why the Out There program is providing kinetic activities for students in schools, and that’s a good thing.

Helen Cameron is an education consultant with The Australian Ballet.

REFERENCES

Cameron, H. & Kendall, D. (1986). *Kinetic Sensory Studies: A movement program for children. (Illustrations by Cameron Davies and Rhys Davies.)* Canberra: Aldine Press.

LINKS:

[The Australian Ballet's three incursion packages for lower, middle and upper primary students in Victoria and New South Wales.](#)

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