

ETHICS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Ethical Conduct in Dance Pedagogy: Touch and Consent

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Picture this: a dance studio filled with eager, determined students reaching, spinning, jumping, and carving their bodies through the space, all in an effort to push themselves physically and mentally to greater artistry. The teacher looks around the room and sees what's missing: the students need to initiate more from their hips so that the choreography strings together seamlessly. But how to get these dance students to realize this, to feel the difference in their own bodies? The teacher gathers the students together and uses one of the students to demonstrate on; the teacher's hands guide the students hips through the space, eliciting a more efficient pathway of the pelvis. The student has an "a ha" moment, and tries the movement again with greater success. The other students play with this idea as well, testing out the initiation from the hips. The dancing resumes, and it is clear that there is a deeper understanding in the room as the dancers more fluidly embodying the choreography.

What happened during this moment of touch between student and teacher? Or, perhaps more importantly, what did *not* happen during this moment of touch? From our story, we gather that touch was important for the learning journey of the dancers in the studio. Touch can be an effective tool for imparting kinesthetic information such as alignment, initiation, and orientation. Teachers from many dance styles have long employed touch in classes, so much so that it has been assumed by students and teachers alike that touch is a routine part of class. As a result, it has been commonplace for teachers to touch students without asking permission. But is it ethically sound for a teacher to touch a student without asking?

In this ethics module in our dance pedagogy course, we unpack this charged moment of touch. We consider the concept of consent as a necessary feature of the dance classroom. We examine what it looks like for students to be given agency over their own bodies while simultaneously engaging in a practice steeped in hierarchies. For if we believe in human rights, do we not believe that individuals have the choice *not* to be touched?

Similar to the antiquated saying that "children should be seen, not heard", dancers in many forms have been taught to quietly and obediently follow the directions of their teachers and choreographers. Add to that the fact that most dance students are children or young people, and it's easy to see that the power imbalance in a classroom can lead to dancers not feeling in control of their own bodies. This reality is further complicated by the historical disenfranchisement of groups of people (BIPOC, women, people with disabilities, etc.) and the commodification of bodies in our capitalist society. These issues compound to create a situation where dance students may be reticent to speak up if they are uncomfortable with any number of touch situations.

As we nurture the next generation of dance teachers through this dance pedagogy course, we advocate for ethical thinking and behavior. By doing so, we ensure that these future teachers can skillfully identify the line between pushing students out of their comfort zone to grow as artists, and venturing into situations that are mentally/physically/ethically problematic.