

Laying a Foundation: Basic Building Blocks



In this chapter you will find the tools to answer the following questions:

- What makes a dance?
- What is the relationship between creativity and choreography?
- How is creativity facilitated?
- What is the structure of a dance class?
- What are the three parts of a dance?

As with any construction, it is important to start by laying a strong foundation to avoid having the structure fall apart. In dance, when you lay a foundation you use knowledge of movement skills, movement elements, and the principles of choreography. Choreography is a creative process. This creative process can be facilitated and taught. Other structures addressed in this chapter are the structures of a dance class and the three parts of a dance.

What Makes a Dance?

Communication through movement should be the goal when building a dance. When we teach students we often use a literary model. We tell them that movements are like words. You put words together to make sentences. In dance these sentences are called dance phrases. Sentences are put together to make paragraphs in the same way that dance phrases are linked to make sections. Sections, when linked together, make a dance.

Relationship Between Creativity and Choreography

Choreography is the art of building dances, and the choreographer is the architect. Creativity figures strongly in this building process—the more creative, inventive, and flexible the choreographer, the more versatile the dance. Once you become comfortable building simple dances, with creativity you can make them more complex. A sense of adventure and imagination makes the sky the limit.

Begin the creative process by learning to organize your thoughts and materials. Small starts and steps can lead to wonderful choreography. Remember that choreography can evolve and change, and there is no one right solution.

Creativity doesn't mean that thoughts and gestures are pulled from the air in an unorganized manner. Two methods that facilitate creativity are the use of imagery and brainstorming. Imagery can be invaluable in helping you envision what a movement should look like. The following are sample questions to stimulate imagery and creativity:

- What does a snowflake look like as it falls to the ground?
- How do tree branches look on a mild, breezy day? Or in a hurricane? (See figure 1.1.)
- What do you see when you think of a schoolyard full of children?



FIGURE 1.1 Some trees are calm and flowing. Others move more sharply in response to the elements.

Brainstorming is a problem-solving strategy. Gathering information through unrestricted and spontaneous discussion stimulates creative thinking and aids in developing new ideas or ways of solving a choreographic problem. Use the following steps to facilitate creativity:

STEP

1. Determine problem.
2. Brainstorm.
3. Improvise and explore movement possibilities.

EXAMPLE

Create a dance showing conflict. Discuss the following: What constitutes a conflict? What does your body feel like during conflict? What image pops into your mind when you think of conflict? What gestures would you use during a confrontation? What facial expressions denote a conflict? Would the movements be smooth or sharp, fast or slow, small or large? To improvise is to compose without preparation or forethought or on the spot, without movement being

directed. The dancers move in ways that they believe best tell their feelings or story. Improvisation can also result from listening to the music and reacting from within. Use improvisation to create three movements: one that moves from place to place, a second frozen in place (pose), and a third that must turn. All moves must convey conflict.

4. Develop choreography. Link the three movements and repeat the series three times in a row.

Use these steps with any subject matter or abstract idea.

Three Parts of a Lesson

A typical dance class has three sections: warm-up, activity, and cool-down. The general information that follows serves as a support structure for lesson planning.

Warm-Up

Although as educators and adults we know the value and necessity of a proper warm-up before any physical activity, we must stress to our students the importance of a careful warm-up. Children are taught that warming up the muscles before a football, baseball, or soccer game or stretching before running or jogging is necessary and beneficial. And because dance is also a physical activity, dance educators should emphasize that warming up is equally important before dancing.

Because children tend to be impressed by visuals and imagery, you can relate the following comparisons to “cold” muscles:

- **Example 1:** Ask the students if they have ever handled Silly Putty. You might ask, “How difficult is it to pull the putty when it is cold, and what happens when you try to stretch it quickly?” (It snaps in two.) Then ask them what happens after you warm the putty in your hand for several minutes. (You suddenly find that it is pliable and offers little resistance to stretching.) Explain that human muscle is like Silly Putty and that taking the time to warm the muscles before exercising makes them more efficient and easier to use.

- **Example 2:** Tap dancers (hoofers) once thought they didn’t have to warm up. After all, they really didn’t stretch or exert their muscles. The late Sammy Davis Jr. once said that if he had known of the need for proper warm-up and had done so regularly, he probably wouldn’t have needed hip-replacement surgery.

Students should know what is needed for a complete warm-up. The following foundation-building components should be included, in the order listed:

1. Lubricate each joint, exploring full range of motion and using gentle movements.
2. Use aerobic movements—repetitive movements that bring blood flow to large muscle groups. Only when there is adequate blood flow to the muscles can you begin to stretch.
3. Stretch large muscle groups.
4. Use crunches and curl-downs for abdominal strength. Curl-downs start from a seated position with knees bent and feet planted firmly on the floor. You then slowly roll the spine down to the floor. (These could also be done at the beginning of a cool-down instead of the end of a warm-up.)

Activity

Whichever activity you select as the focus of your lesson, use the following general progression:

1. Introduce a movement skill. This is a physical skill that includes both locomotor and nonlocomotor movement. A broader explanation and examples can be found in chapter 2.
2. Introduce a movement element. This term defines how and where a movement is done. A broader explanation can be found in chapter 2.
3. Create a movement pattern or sequence using skills and elements. This is where students can learn some important information about dance and choreography. Their work may involve learning and memorizing a teacher’s movement.
4. Have students explore the use of movement skills and elements using problem-solving techniques.

Cool-Down

Use the cool-down segment of your lesson to accomplish the following:

1. After strenuous activity the muscles and cardiovascular system need to return to normal. Students should continue a slow activity until their breathing and heart rate are normal.
2. Students need a calming conclusion to the physical activity before returning to their academic activities.
3. During this time, students and teachers can reflect on the lesson of the day and on what everyone has learned.

Safety Tips

Stress the following safety practices at every level during all warm-up and dance activities.

1. When doing knee bends (pliés), keep the knees over the toes.
2. When doing any kind of jump, start from bent knees (plié) and land with bent knees (in plié).
3. Align the spine properly in every exercise. Avoid a hyperextended back or a forward-thrust pelvis.
4. Always make sure there is adequate blood flow to the muscles before stretching.
5. Make sure shoulders are relaxed and pulled down.
6. If during any movement throughout the lesson you feel pain, stop immediately.
7. Take time to cool down by continuing to walk. (Different students' heart rates return to normal at different times. Encourage students to take whatever time they need to cool down adequately and to be aware and in charge of their own bodies.)

Three Sample Lesson Plans

Warm-Up

This teacher-facilitated warm-up is designed to give children the necessary tools to create their own developmentally correct warm-ups for future use. Before beginning a warm-up, lay down the ground rules: Make no sharp movements of the neck, always make the knees face the same direction as the toes, and make movements gentle.

1. The lubrication portion of the warm-up includes an inventory of the joints and muscles and an exploration of how they can be moved.

Starting with the top of the body, ask the students how many ways they can move their body parts:

- Head and neck
- Shoulders
- Arms, elbows, and wrists
- Torso
- Hips and legs
- Knees, ankles, and feet

(This exploration can also be done from bottom to top.)

2. The aerobic portion of a warm-up includes
 - alternate jogging in place and freezing,
 - alternate hopping and freezing,
 - alternate jumping and freezing, and
 - alternate skipping and freezing.
3. You can begin the stretch portion of the warm-up by asking students how they can
 - make their bodies taller,
 - make their arms reach the ceiling,
 - make their arms reach the side walls, and
 - make their hands touch their toes and then try to straighten their knees.

Activity

1. Select and teach three movement skills:
 - Run (card 59)
 - Slide (card 17)
 - Twist (card 67)
2. Introduce and explore an aspect of the movement element of force—strong or weak:
 - Run like a football player.
 - Run like your legs are made of marshmallows.
 - While standing still, make your body look strong.
 - While standing still, make your body look weak.
 - Change the feeling in your muscles to show that they are strong or weak.
3. Develop a small movement pattern using the three movement skills and the movement elements. For example, ask students to slide, twist, and melt down weakly or rise up strongly and run.

Cool-Down

Choose one of the following, depending on how vigorous the class was:

- Stand the students in a circle and have them
 - place their arms out or on their hips;
 - put their chins on their chests and breathe deeply, raising their heads as they inhale and lowering their heads as they exhale; and
 - raise their arms up to their sides as they inhale and lower them as they exhale.
- Discuss the day's activities with students, including what seemed important to them and what they think they should remember.

Warm-Up

- The lubrication portion of the warm-up should include an inventory of the joints and muscles and an exploration of how they can be moved. Starting with the top of the body, ask the students how many ways they can move their body parts:
 - Head and neck
 - Shoulders
 - Arms, elbows, and wrists
 - Torso
 - Hips and legs
 - Knees, ankles, and feet

(This exploration can also be done from bottom to top.)
- The aerobic portion of the warm-up is called the "fraction" warm-up because it teaches directional signals using mathematics. Students face forward with their feet comfortably apart. They will change directions every eight counts using small jumps in place and jump turns. The teacher is the caller, and the students jump simultaneously with the call.

A sample series of calls follows:

Caller (counts aloud) 1, 2, 3, 4, quarter (5), turn (6), to the (7), right (8).

Students jump in place for the 8 counts. On the first count of the next 8-count pattern, the students execute the quarter turn as commanded.

Caller (counts aloud) 1, 2, 3, 4, half (5), turn (6), to the (7), left (8).

Students, facing new direction, jump in place for the second 8 counts, and then execute a half turn as commanded on the first count of the next 8-count pattern.

Caller (counts aloud) 1, 2, 3, 4, three-quarter (5), turn (6), to the (7), left (8).

Students, facing new direction, jump in place for the third set of 8 counts, and then execute a three-quarter turn as commanded on the first count of the next 8-count pattern.

Note: Always continue the activity from the direction that was last called.

This activity, in addition to being aerobic, sharpens listening skills and teaches math skills.

- Begin the stretch portion of the warm-up by asking students how they can
 - make their bodies taller,
 - make their arms reach the ceiling,
 - make their arms reach the side walls,
 - make their hands touch their toes while they try to straighten their knees, and
 - make their muscles feel and become longer.

Also ask students how they can do these stretches while sitting or lying on the floor.

Activity

- Select and teach the following three movement skills:
 - Three-step turn (card 61)
 - Kick (card 45)
 - Leap (card 4)
- Introduce and explore an aspect of the movement element of space—change of direction #1 (card 148).
- Develop a small movement pattern using the three movement skills and the movement element. For example, ask students to do a three-step turn, run and leap, and kick (letting the kick change their direction).

Cool-Down

Choose one or more of the following to be included in your cool-down, depending on the class activities:

- Students stand in a circle and
 - place their arms out or on their hips;

- put their chins on their chests and breathe deeply, raising their heads as they inhale and lowering their heads as they exhale;
 - raise their arms up to their sides as they inhale and lower them as they exhale; and
 - roll the body down to a limp, folded-over position while exhaling and then bring it to an erect, shoulder-squared position while inhaling.
2. Discuss the day's activities with students, including what seemed important to them and what they think they should remember.
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Warm-Up

1. The lubrication portion of the warm-up includes an inventory of the joints and muscles and an exploration of how they can be moved. Starting with the top of the body, ask the students how many ways they can move their body parts:
 - Head and neck
 - Shoulders
 - Arms, elbows, and wrists
 - Torso
 - Hips and legs
 - Knees, ankles, and feet
 (This exploration can also be done from bottom to top.)
2. Begin the aerobic portion of the warm-up by having the students stand in a circle. They then play follow the leader, with each student developing a movement that he or she thinks contributes to the aerobic activity.
3. The stretch portion of the warm-up continues with the students in a circle. They each demonstrate a movement, which the rest of the class follows, that contributes to this section.

Activity

1. Select and teach three movement skills:
 - Jazz box (card 63)
 - Kick, ball-change (card 32)
 - Wrap turn (card 62)
2. Introduce and explore the movement element of space—use of floor pattern (cards 173, 174, 175, and 176).

3. Combine movement skills and movement elements:
 - Working in small groups, the students create three poses.
 - Combine these poses with the movement skills in the previous list.
 - Perform movement patterns in several different floor patterns.
 - Present the small-group creations to the class.

Cool-Down

Choose any one or more of the following to be included in your cool-down, depending on the class activities:

1. Students stand in a circle and
 - place their arms out or on their hips;
 - put their chins on their chests and breathe deeply, raising their heads as they inhale and lowering their heads as they exhale;
 - raise their arms up to their sides as they inhale and lower them as they exhale; and
 - roll the body down to a limp, folded-over position while exhaling and then bring it to an erect, shoulder-squared position while inhaling.
 2. Discuss the day's activities with students:
 - What part of the lesson seemed important to them?
 - What do they think they should remember?
 - What did they learn?
 - Which of the movement patterns did they enjoy the most, and why?
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Three Parts of a Dance

A well-structured dance has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Beginning

The beginning of the dance should be clear and, whatever the choice, should capture the audience's attention. The following are some options:

- Think of the opening as a tableau, a picture, or a painting.
- Start the dance on stage or off.
- Start the dance with music or without, or begin the music before the dance.

Middle

The middle, or body, of the dance should not lose the audience's attention by being boring or trite. It should be a development of the main idea. The following are among the countless ways to make the middle interesting:

- Vary movement patterns.
- Repeat movement patterns.
- Perform movement patterns at different times.
- Have different groups perform complementary movement patterns simultaneously.
- Vary dancers' positions on the stage.

End

The conclusion should also be clearly defined:

- If the dance ends "on stage," hold the final pose as though it were a painting.
- Have the dancers leave the stage.
- End the dance with the music, have it continue after the music has ended, or end the dance and have the music continue.

Both the teacher and students should look at the dance with an artist's eye. Most people know what looks good, so remember that aesthetics are in the eye of the beholder.

Summary

As the instructor or facilitator, you can develop and implement creative lessons. These lessons provide students with foundational skills. You will be able to facilitate creativity and choreography by knowing and understanding what makes a dance, the three parts of a dance, and the three parts of a lesson.

Chapter 2

Identifying Building Supplies: Basic Materials for Building Dances



In this chapter you will find the tools to answer the following questions:

- What are movement skills?
- What are movement elements?
- How do cultural influences affect your dance?
- How does knowledge of historical and social perspectives help you make a dance?
- What are three helpful ways of organizing music?