

Beginners Teacher Blues

Why beginning ballet students deserve top-notch teaching and how to make it happen

“I’ll teach at your school, but only advanced or, in a pinch, intermediate students. I won’t teach ballet to beginners.” Is there a school director anywhere who has not heard this version of “I don’t do windows?” Many instructors consider it beneath their dignity to teach ballet—or any kind of dance—to beginners. A lack of teachers who are interested in and qualified to teach beginning ballet, along with some of the ways school directors respond to this problem, can negatively affect the quality of ballet instruction.

Why do so many teachers prefer working with advanced students? The obvious answer is that those students tend to be committed and enthusiastic and to work harder than their lower-level schoolmates. Most of them do ballet because they love it, and they push themselves without much instructor intervention. The teacher need only concentrate on the dancing—a pleasant and not-too-tiring proposition. A second reason is that advanced students may be technically easier to teach than beginning students, especially for new instructors who are making the transition from performing. Performers have trained their bodies to do most ballet moves with ease and fluidity and have spent their professional lives around people with similar mastery. Consequently they find the capabilities of students who have already absorbed the basics of ballet training more familiar, and therefore consider such students easier to teach. Classes with advanced students who add beauty and intricacy to their dancing can be quite exciting; teachers can develop challenging series of steps with various tempos and types of music for these students. Not surprisingly such classes appeal to ex-performers who are familiar with this kind of energy.

The challenge of teaching beginners

Teaching beginners requires different skills than those needed in working with advanced students, and the fact that an instructor is good with advanced students does not mean that he or she will be just as good with beginners. In other words, the ability to teach beginners is not a “lesser-included capability” of the ability to teach advanced students competently. The most important skill in teaching beginners is a great deal of patience. Young children who are starting ballet, even in professional programs, often do not display the kind of commitment required to make progress. Discipline problems can arise when children cannot or do not want to focus on the class. Even focused students learn ballet slowly. The first years of training involve conditioning the body so that it can perform ballet moves safely and beautifully, and this development progresses slowly even for physically gifted and motivated students. The moves tend to be static, involving considerable repetition, correction, and command, and students do not actually dance a great deal at this stage; consequently teachers must be passionate and work hard to keep students interested. Having an unmotivated teacher in the classroom may lead to bored and resentful students who are prone to quitting.

Instructors of beginning-level students must also have a complete understanding of ballet moves and know how to demonstrate them. They must know some anatomy and be able to estimate what the students can do given their physical abilities and limitations. Their goal should be to enable students to work to their *maximum* while never going *beyond* their capability, thus risking injury. Ironically, performers who are transitioning to instructors may have forgotten the basics they went through themselves many years before. Those with a natural facility for ballet often have difficulty analyzing the detail of individual moves and assisting less-gifted students in conditioning their bodies.

Finally, teaching ballet to beginners is just more *work*. The instructor must plan not only each lesson but also the course syllabus, as well as assessing the class's pace and organization. This process becomes easier with experience, but each class has its own challenges. Only teachers who are passionate about teaching ballet are likely to enjoy teaching ballet to beginners.

The director's dilemma

Most school directors find it difficult to find instructors who are willing and able to teach beginners competently. Because school directors know that only a small fraction of students will proceed to the intermediate or advanced levels, they may conclude that beginning-level ballet instruction is not important. Sometimes they assign their least qualified instructors, advanced students, or even parents to teach beginning classes. They may rationalize that students who acquire bad habits in such classes can be "cleaned up" by better-qualified instructors in more advanced classes.

But resolving the dilemma this way leads to problems. Students who have acquired bad habits because of deficient early instruction do not do basic ballet moves well, nor are they ready for more complicated moves. Even students with no professional potential run an ever-increasing risk of injury if they try to perform moves beyond their capability. For students who have professional potential, the results of poor initial training can be devastating. Besides the increased risk of injury, their bad habits will severely limit their ability to compete for positions in professional companies.

A director's hope that a student can be cleaned up in later instruction is apt to be no more than wishful thinking. Almost every teacher has had the unhappy experience of seeing ballet students with good physical potential who are limited by deficient early training. Teaching such dancers requires being especially attentive to their moves and quick to correct mistakes, a tiring and often unproductive process. Such students, even if they understand the need for correction intellectually, may soon begin to resent what appears to be an incessant barrage of criticism. And despite both the students' and teachers' best intentions and efforts, ballet dancers, like all human beings, tend to revert to bad habits that feel comfortable under conditions of stress. Unfortunately, this stress is likely to be induced by competitions, auditions, and performances, the very conditions under which proper technique is most important.

Searching for a solution

There exists no “magic formula” that will enable school directors to find and retain instructors who have the temperament, skills, and desire to teach students of beginning ballet. School directors can, however, take steps to improve their chances.

First and foremost, do not try to rationalize the problem away by pretending that beginning ballet instruction is not important. Second, demonstrate the value that you place on beginning ballet instruction by visiting those classes at least as often as you do advanced classes, perhaps even teaching them periodically. Identify beginning students who show potential and desire and pay as much attention to them as you do to your advanced students. Encourage them to consider participating in competitions and auditions when possible. Finally, use the tools available to you as a school director (status and money) to reward instructors who show excellence in teaching beginners. Recognize those who teach beginners well (e.g., change your faculty roster from alphabetical order and list them first) and consider paying them more or giving them a bonus.

People do respond to such incentives, and by using them you will improve the morale of beginning ballet instructors, the performance of beginning students, and the overall quality of your ballet program.