

Five steps to a balanced body: a holistic 10-minute preparation for dance classes and movement activities

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Abstract

The focus of this report is in-class preparation for dance training classes in suburban dance studios and recreational settings, including young and adolescent dancers learning any style of dance. A transition from everyday activities to the activities of the dance lesson will be time-effective, engaging for the mind as well as the body, and relevant to the subsequent class work. The five steps is a short sequence that I have found to be an effective preparation for my own young and adolescent students in a suburban dance studio.

Context

The focus of this report is on in-class preparation for dance classes in suburban dance studios and recreational settings, including young and adolescent dancers learning any style of dance. Pre-class preparation should result in a body that is energised and a brain that is motivated – that is, a student who is ready for the first exercises in class. A transition from everyday activities to the activities of the dance lesson needs to be time-effective, engaging for the mind as well as the body, and relevant to the subsequent class work.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, when I was a young dance student, warm-up was not a recognised part of dance training. The general understanding was that a dance class was suitably constructed to systematically prepare and develop the movements of the body, culminating in the more demanding steps of elevation and locomotion towards the end of class.

In 1990, Tony Geeves authored the first Safe Dance Report on dance injury and prevention management in Australia. This publication included discussion of research then available in the areas of injury prevention and management, body therapies, rehearsal and management practices. Geeves (1990, p. 36) noted that a cardio-vascular component was usually missing but 'is not a problem in itself as the well-constructed dance class begins slowly, builds to a maximum workload and warms down.'

Although the discussion of warm-up in the Report is brief, it provided endorsed acknowledgement of this when interest in developing a better understanding of the dancer's body was in its early stages. The recommendations that 'A complete warm-up is always necessary before dancing full out' (Geeves, 1990, p. 36) and 'Warm-up with the appropriate technique before rehearsal' (Geeves, 1990, p. 37) were at the leading edge of research-based advice for dancers in Australia at the time. The need for warm-up to be included as a crucial element in dance training programs

was still an emerging concept that gained recognition gradually in the following decade, and then much more rapidly to achieve the current widespread inclusion of warm-up for movement activities including the performing arts and diverse sports. Protocols for warm-ups for specific movement activities and the benefits or detriments of the various types of stretching have been proposed, debated, applied and adjusted over the past three decades.

Today, the importance of a warm-up for dance and other movement activities is widely recognised and well documented. The principles are explained, and the components listed by Quin, Rafferty, and Tomlinson (2015). In his article Warm Up II, David Bishop (2003) analyses the effects of active warm-up on performance (2003). Online links to reputable organisations including The Australian Ballet Education Resources (2023), Ausdance National (2023), and the Victoria State Government Department of Health (2015) provide valuable guidance for practical application.

But are we inclined to swing too far the other way? From little or no warm-up to too much? Bishop (2003), claims that 'The structure of the warm-up will depend on many factors, including the task to be undertaken, the physical capabilities of the athlete, the environmental conditions and also any constraints imposed by the organisation of the event', (p. 7).

In the course of several decades of teaching young dancers and attempting to meet the evolving recommendations for warm-up, my observations of students, combined with feedback from them, has indicated that they frequently skip or skimp on their warming up, and they often feel somewhat enervated and lacking liveliness after a full warm up, rather than engaged and energized. Additionally, a comprehensive warm-up is lengthy, requiring more time than is generally available in class.

Dance is an art form, and the body is the dancer's instrument. 'Teachers of any art must understand the instrument or the materials with which the artist works...fashioning the instrument at the same time as instructing the budding artist who inhabits the instrument.' (Martyn ,1999, p. 263). This view of the body suggests that it is an instrument lacking agency, in contrast to the current concept that dance artistry requires involvement of the total being, that is, the body and the mind. Recent literature recognises that the mind must be prepared prior to class, rehearsal or performance, along with the body. Janet Karin (2023) advocates ballet as a holistic art form and discusses the integration of mind, brain and body in her recent work *The Art and Science of Ballet Dancing and Teaching*. I believe that the mind-body connection is a priority of pre-class preparation to facilitate the transition from everyday activities to those of the dance class in a holistic preparation for artistic pursuit.

The importance of the awareness and coordination of the breath to achieve this transition is often overlooked. Incorrect breathing patterns create imbalances and

instability in the body and reduce functional movement. Breathing correctly, rather than holding the breath or shallow breathing, is a crucial component of achieving a balanced body and mind and a well-tuned dancing instrument. Breathing consciously facilitates focus. Rael Isacowitz (2006) in the chapter entitled Enhancing the Mind and Body in his book *Pilates*, says that breathing 'promotes natural movement and is the first step to educating the neuromuscular system' (p. 7). Consciousness and regulation of breathing is fundamental to the preparation discussed in this report and is incorporated in all five steps.

The other important factor to be considered is time. Right from the start it is important to include a preparation component in every dance class, and to progressively train the students' understanding of the purpose and value of these activities. Over time, students develop the ability to independently perform a thorough preparation suited to their own body and recognise the differences between preparation required for class and performance.

The structure of every dance class must include warm-up, yet how do teachers manage this when the recommended duration for a warm up is quite lengthy when considered in relation to class time. For example, Quin, Rafferty and Tomlinson (2015, p.73) recommend that 'a warm-up should ideally last 15 to 20 minutes' and this is also the recommendation of the International Association for Dance Medicine & Science (2017, p.4).

Preparation must be sufficient to allow the best use of class time, which is limited, balanced with sufficient preparation for the body and mind. Tensions and imbalance which arise from everyday activities must be released. The mind becomes focussed on the dance environment and the immediate performance tasks.

In this next section, I will describe the short sequence that I have found to be an effective preparation for my own young and adolescent dance students so that other dance teachers may implement this approach and make adaptations to suit their own students.

Five steps to a balanced body

The following Five Steps may be used as a preparation for dance classes, movement activities ... and life! This short sequence evolved through practice, feedback and adjustment in real class time. It aims to establish a mind-body connection as the basis for using the body, and to find release and balance before commencing classwork or performance, without expending energy that may be better used during the activities to follow. Rather than a 'warm-up', a holistic preparation that is time-effective is the goal.

Each of the Five Steps is introduced in simple movements which together comprise a basic 10-minute preparation that is easy to remember and easy to perform.

Step 1: 'Spherical' or 'eight-hand' breathing

When breathing is shallow, oxygen is less likely to reach the lowest part of the lungs, where there is a concentration of the alveoli, microscopic air sacs where the exchange of gases between the air and the bloodstream occurs. Deeper, slower breaths lead to a higher rate of oxygen entering the blood stream and reaching the brain. The parasympathetic nervous system is engaged, the heart rate is regulated and muscular tensions are released. The mind also becomes relaxed. This state facilitates the connections between mind and body, tones the autonomic nervous system which is frequently in overdrive, and facilitates the assimilation of new neural pathways.

'Spherical' or 'eight-hand' breathing, that is breathing into all parts of the lungs on each in-breath and fully emptying the lungs on each out-breath, is initially explored using the hands placed on various parts of the ribcage and lungs to provide feedback.

First, standing in an easy parallel position with the feet directly under the hip joints, place the palms flat on the lower ribs at the front, with fingers long and touching each other. Take at least three slow breaths, allowing the fingers to spread on the in-breath and touch again on the out-breath, and feeling the contact of the palms and fingers on the ribcage. Closing the eyes facilitates the feeling of contact.

Repeat this with hands on the sides of the ribs. Next, use the backs of the hands to make the contact with the back of the ribcage and repeat the breaths. Then place the hands so the fingers are on the highest part of the lungs at the front and again repeat the breaths. Finally, focus on the feeling of the hands being in contact with all eight places at once, and take three more slow breaths. The arms may be allowed to hang down by the sides of the body, or placed in any position that is helpful for the participant, but must not create tension.

At first this will take some time, but once understood, it can be performed immediately in its final form. Verbal reminders of the 'hands on' practice become valuable cues. A Hoberman sphere, or breathing ball, provides useful imagery for students and an alternative cue.

Practising this way of breathing is a simple but crucial first step and is then applied in each of the following steps to reinforce and sustain how the body feels and moves in its new state.

Step 2: An equalised base of support

Standing in parallel, the weight is transferred mindfully to various parts of the feet. Initially, simply transfer the weight forwards and backwards. After repeating this simple movement about four times, the body is gently allowed to find balanced placement, sharing the weight equally between those points of the foot. The arms

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are released by the sides of the body. Two or three spherical breaths with the eyes closed are now taken to allow the brain and body to connect to this feeling. The hands should now hang just forward of the thighs.

Step 3: A balanced pelvis/core

The palms of the hands are placed to feel the activation of abdominal and lumbar muscles as the pelvis is tilted forward and back. After repeating this simple movement about four times, the body is gently allowed to find balanced placement of the pelvis, with no undue muscular tension. Again, two or three spherical breaths with the eyes closed and the arms released down are now taken to allow the brain and body to connect to this feeling.

Step 4: A released spine

The thumbs are placed underneath the mastoid process – behind the ears on the lower part of the skull - and the base of the skull is lifted smoothly upwards, focusing on length and lightness in the spine, especially the top of the neck. With the skull now floating easily on the top of the spine, the hands are moved, and the arms allowed to float down and then hang gently downwards. Spherical breathing with the eyes closed is performed as before.

Step 5: A balanced shoulder girdle

The shoulders are moved up and down four times, then forward and back four times. Then the body is allowed to find balanced placement and spherical breathing with the eyes closed is performed as before.

Cumulative awareness, alignment and stability

Additional breaths can be included at any point as necessary to review the previous steps and scan through the body.

Effectiveness

A simple comparison of ease of task can be carried out by performing a few simple movements before and after performing the 5 steps and then comparing them for ease and quality of movement. A good combination for this checking purpose is three standing spinal rolls, pelvic rolls side to side in supine crook lying with knees bent and feet and legs touching, and some small springs in parallel standing position.

Application

A preparation of some sort is essential for all dance and movement classes and performances. This will vary considerably depending on the participants and the

movements to follow. Very young children do not need a lengthy or complex preparation, but they can learn that it is a regular requisite of their class. As children develop their movement and dance skills, say from the age of five years old, they can learn more complex components individually and develop them incrementally, gradually combining them to increase the length of the preparation to suit the more challenging skills they will be practising. From the age of around ten years, they can be encouraged to understand the individuality of their own bodies, the importance of focus and attention and their effect on performance, and to gradually develop their own independent preparation sequences.

The Five Steps Preparation is highly adaptable. Each Step can be varied to suit the movements to follow and the development of the individual dancer. For example, in Step 2, transference of weight side to side in parallel standing can be added, then wider positions of the feet, and even different postures of the body such as four-point kneeling, side lying and so on. Movements of the leg or bends of the spine may be added to Step 3.

As well as being suitable for a short preparation for class, the 5 Steps sequence is fully flexible and adaptable to a range of situations including quickly regaining a prepared body after a short break, recapturing focus during class, providing effective cues for improved movements, and for a cool-down at the end of class, a transition to daily activities.

Individual Steps may even be amplified to become the focus of a full session in their own right, or to create an extended preparation as a basis for more demanding performance.

Concluding thoughts

This easy-to-learn basic preparation provides an effective transition from daily activities to the movements to follow and facilitates the connection of the mind and body that is essential for best focused participation. A clear focused and energized state of the body and mind is achieved in a time-efficient manner.

Its flexible approach allows it to be adapted to suit a wide range of participants, from young children, in a deconstructed manner, to older children learning to construct the components of a complete preparation, to adolescents and young adults learning to create and adapt a preparation suited to their own body instrument and performance needs.

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Biography

Jane is a senior dance educator who has worked in this field for over 35 years, teaching at several dance schools, lecturing at Box Hill Institute for 15 years, and developing VET training and assessment resources for accredited dance teacher training courses in Australia. Jane's international presentations include IADMS 2012-2017 inclusive, and daCI 2015, 2018 and 2022. She has written a dance teaching manual for young dance students, 'Dance Is...' and is executive of the Laurel Martyn Dance Teaching System.

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