Contemporary Dance Teacher’s Study Guide
Hello teachers!
Made in BC- Dance on Tour’s goal is to share contemporary dance by BC Artists with BC audiences.

We’ve made this guide as a tool to introduce you and your students to contemporary dance through your choice of discussion and/or dance-making.

This guide includes:
  • What is Contemporary Dance?
  • Classroom activities for talking about dance and dance-making
  • Contemporary Dance and dance education web-links

The activities can be easily adapted to the age and interests of your class.

About Made in BC - Dance on Tour
To learn more about us, the communities we work with, or BC dance artists performing near you, please visit us at www.madeinbc.org
What is Contemporary Dance?

Textbook definitions of contemporary dance refer to a collection of dance forms and methods which draw on 20th century western concert dance, including ballet, modern and post-modern dance. Simply put, contemporary dance is dance that is being created and performed by dancers who are working now.

Fusing practices
Contemporary dance in Canada encompasses a wide range of techniques, often challenging traditional boundaries by drawing on classical forms and fusing them with the diverse training, life experiences and cultural backgrounds of the choreographer and dancers. Building on the traditional use of such elements as lighting, props, costumes, and music, contemporary dance often draws on different dance styles (such as ballet, modern, jazz, hip hop, flamenco, tap, bharatnatyam, butoh, and improvisation to name just a few). Contemporary dance may also involve an interdisciplinary approach, using tools and ideas from theatre, visual art and new media, and incorporating elements like text, voice and technology into the performance. Collaboration with artists from other disciplines is common.

Even with these diverse influences, the primary tool in contemporary dance is the body.

Contemporary dance artists
Contemporary dance artists come from a range of backgrounds. They may train in classical dance forms, they may have other physical backgrounds, such as martial arts or physical theatre, and they may come from other fields entirely. As in classical ballet, some contemporary dance artists begin their dance training at a very young age, but some contemporary dance artists come to dance as adults. In addition to dance training, contemporary dancers often use conditioning techniques- such as yoga and pilates- to help develop and maintain things like strength, alignment and body awareness, and may also learn other techniques- like voicework, or clowning- to add to their artistic toolbox. Whereas historically there has been a clear distinction between the job of choreographer and dancer, some contemporary dance artists work in both roles, sometimes dancing in their own choreography. To develop themselves as creators, contemporary dance artists may also study choreography and dance-making.

The stage
Most contemporary dance is presented in a traditional theatre, on a stage, with the audience watching from one side. In the same way that contemporary dance challenges traditional boundaries by fusing different techniques, sometimes contemporary dance artists play with different ways an audience can watch a dance by placing the dance, and the audience, in an unexpected place- such as streets, restaurants, bars, parks, homes, and nooks and crannies of buildings. Contemporary dance is sometimes choreographed specifically for the mediums of video or film, and the audience can watch it in places like a theatre, an art gallery, on t.v., or online.

The audience
Because it uses the body as its primary tool, contemporary dance- like classical dance- is abstract by nature. Like music or poetry, contemporary dance relies on the audience to trust their gut responses to the dance. Audiences may be expected to enjoy the beauty of the body, the virtuosity and athleticism of the dancers, the craft of the choreography, and also to be curious about ideas, questions, or stories that the dance proposes.
Activities

1. Dance elements

Objective:
These are a series of activities for:
- finding language to describe elements of dance, and
- exploring the elements of dance using the body.

If you are not watching a live performance together, pick a short dance video to watch with your class so that you have a frame of reference. See resources attached for online links.

Introduction:

Discuss: What is a painting made out of? (eg. canvas, frame, paint) What is a book made of? (eg. paper, words, ideas) What is a dance made of? (eg. People/bodies, music, props, lights, stories)
- The primary tool in dance is the body. Dancing bodies move in space and time, with different kinds of energy.

Exploring Space
Like a sculptor sculpts clay, dancers use body parts to sculpt the space around them.
Discuss: In the dance you’ve watched together, how do the dancers use:
- shape? (Do they make lines, circles, spirals? What body parts do they use? Are the shapes big or small? Are they vertical, horizontal, diagonal?)
- level? (Do they jump in the air? On the ground? Do they roll on the ground? Through the air?)
- relationship? (How many dancers are there? Where are they in relation to each another? Are they doing the same thing, or different things? Do they dance at the same time? Do they make the space feel full or empty? Do they dance near the audience, or far away?)

Game for exploring space: The Grid
Inspired by the “Viewpoints” by Mary Overlie and Anne Bogart.
1. Dancers can walk through the space only in straight lines, like on graph paper.
2. In addition to walking, stopping and lying down are also allowed. But only walking, stopping and lying down. No other kinds of movements!
3. Divide the group in two, so one group can observe. Discuss what both groups notice about use of space.
4. Try again, but this time dancers can play with changing their speed.

To build on this activity:
In small groups, students can take a turn as choreographer, and try out different ideas, such as: How long will the dancers perform the movement? At what speed? Are the dancers allowed to add in any new movements? What if the dancers moved in circles instead of lines? Where will the audience watch from? What will the dancers wear? How do these decisions affect the dance? When debriefing the dances, notice how the different choices made by the different choreographers affected each dance.
Exploring Energy
Energy is like an adverb— it describes how movements or movement phrases are performed, and it affects the mood that is created.

Discuss: In the dance you’ve watched together, how are the movements performed? Brainstorm a list of words to describe them (e.g. Light, heavy, poky, floaty, sharp, dizzy, mechanical, soft) How does this affect the mood of the piece? Is there a story implied by the movements? How would the mood or story change if the same movements were performed with a different energy?

Game for exploring energy: Action Words
1. As a group, make 2 lists: one of verbs (action words), and one of adverbs (how-you-do-the-action words). Put the verbs in one hat, and the adverbs in another.
2. Have a leader pull out 1 action word and 1 adverb for dancers to try. Dancers can take turns calling out a pair of words for the group to try.
3. Discuss what dancers noticed about the pairings. What expectations did they have about how to do certain actions? What were the surprises?

To build on this activity:
Divide into small groups. Each group selects 5 verbs and 5 adverbs from the hat. Using the words to create movements, the group creates a short dance (or movement phrase) by putting the movements together in an order of their choice. Each group performs their movement phrase, and the audience tries to guess the verbs and adverbs the dance came from.

Exploring Time
Dance plays with time, timing and rhythm.

Discuss: In the dance you’ve watched together, how do the dancers you are watching use:
- speed? (Do they move fast, slow, or medium? Do they speed up and slow down? Do they suspend the movements?)
- rhythm? (Is there a rhythm? Is it regular or irregular? How does it change? Is there music? Do they move with the rhythm of the music, or against it?)

Game for exploring time: Freeze
Using a variety of fast and slow music, dancers move when you turn the music on, and freeze when you turn it off.

Discuss: What kinds of movements come naturally with each speed? Are dancers moving with or against the music?
Repeat the game, but instruct dancers to move slowly to slow music, and fast to fast music. Then, instruct dancers to move fast to slow music, and slow to fast music.

To build on this activity:
Repeat in two groups. Have the audience describe the different affects of moving with or against the music.
2. Fusing Practices: Making a Dance Video

This activity is for making a simple dance video using found objects and actions. Students will
• discuss the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary dance-making,
• explore the use of source materials, and
• make a short, collaborative dance video.

Students will need:
• A video-recording device (camera or cell phone)
• Access to public space

Part 1: Introduction & Discussion
Find out what students know about contemporary dance.
• What is contemporary dance? How is it different from classical dance? Who has ever seen any contemporary dance? How would you describe it?

Discuss: Contemporary dance is dance that is being created and performed by dancers who are working now. Contemporary dance encompasses a wide range of techniques, and may incorporate elements of other art forms. Use the What is Contemporary Dance page for more details.
Option: If students have not seen any contemporary dance, you can visit Arts Alive’s website, and watch A Very Dangerous Pastime, a 14 minute video with lots of examples (see resource list).

Discuss: Contemporary dance may incorporate elements like text, voice and technology into the performance. Contemporary dance is sometimes choreographed specifically for the mediums of video or film, and the audience can watch it in places like a theatre, an art gallery, on t.v. or online.
• Pick one dance performance you have seen. What kinds of things do you think inspired the choreographer to make the dance?

Discuss: Dance artists may use certain movements or objects as an inspiration or starting point for making a dance. These objects, ideas, or movements are called source materials.

Part 2: Gathering Source Materials & Creating a Dance
1. Break students into small groups of 3-5. Tell them they have 15 minutes to gather the following source materials:
• 5 Gestures (Gesture is a form of non-verbal communication made with the body.)
• A line of text (eg. a sentence they hear someone speak, a line from a book or from a sign)
• An object

2. Once the students have gathered their items, tell them they have 30 minutes to make a short dance video using just those items on the list, in any way they want. Remind them that even with diverse influences and inspirations, the primary tool in contemporary dance is the body, and so their dance video should reflect this.

3. Showing and Discussion
How did students use their source materials? What kind of movement was inspired from the source materials? How did the gestures change from their original form? What new meanings were created? What else influenced the dance? What kind of sound would they add in, if any, and why? What might they do next to build on what they have already made?
Resources:

To learn about dance:
www.artsalive.ca
This is the National Arts Centre’s arts education site, with a whole dance-learning section, including the 14 minute video A Very Dangerous Pastime: A Devastatingly Simple Dance Guide

To watch dance-on-film:
www.bravofact.com
CTV’s bravofACT has a library of several hundred dance shorts, watchable on-line.
www.thedancecentre.ca
The Dance Centre has a links page to more online dance-on-film resources (as well as dance schools, companies and festivals in BC, nationally and internationally).

To find out about contemporary dance near you:
Made in BC – Dance and Tour is pleased to connect audiences, artists and presenters of dance. Our website has information about contemporary dance companies touring BC, and you can always contact us directly for more information.

Aknowledgements:

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References & Influences: