

### Cultivating agency in high school dancers

Many high school dancers are not connected to dance studios or are not participating in training outside of what their team offers. In many cases, this causes a detriment to young dancers, particularly in the summer if the team takes a break and does not offer opportunities to rehearse, build on, or even maintain skills.

To address this, we decided to offer four classes and a workshop throughout the summer to provide opportunities for high school dancers to grow during their “off” months. We tried to make our classes and workshops as geographically diverse as possible to provide equity of access. In addition to these classes, we put together a panel, focused on choreography, to see if instruction would be well received by the dancers in this unusual format.

Many of the high school dance team members we work with start dancing in high school, which means they have not had much time to establish connections to nearby studios and teachers. This can make those students dependent on coaches and their team to provide all of their learning opportunities. We feel that it is important to connect students who wish to pursue dance outside of their team to local studios and make them aware of the wealth of dance opportunities that exist. This gives students greater ownership over their dance journey and their training and empowers them to continue their dance career, professionally or casually, and even after high school.



We have also noted that there is a distinct lack of professional development opportunities for dancers in the form of discussions and seminars. Data we have collected through our work with students has shown that students are most interested in learning choreography. From that, we decided to assemble a 30-minute panel during the final summer workshop. The panel focused on four experienced instructors of varying dance styles sharing their process and inspiration relating to choreography. This was our first attempt at addressing a dance-related topic in this way.

Throughout all of these programs, we were administering surveys and talking with students to find out more about what was valuable to their learning and how they think about dance outside of school settings.

There were some exciting findings in the survey we administered during our final workshop.

- The choreography panel proved to be well received with most of the dancers rating what they learned from it as a 4 or 5 on a scale from 1 to 5 (5 being the highest).
- Teaching is the topic they would most like to learn about at the next workshop and auditioning skills came in after that.
- A majority of the dancers took themes of originality and staying true to your own expression away from the choreography panel. One student said, *"Don't compare yourself to other choreographers, be unique in your own choreography."* Another dancer shared the same sentiment, *"Isolate yourself and don't be afraid to be original."* We found this to be a particularly poignant message to walk away with in an age where young artists are often bombarded by other artists' work and the pressures of comparison and keeping up with the current trends are heavy.
- The other encouraging finding was that four out of the seven participants (or 57%) answered that they had taken a class at a studio on their own as a result of participating in a foundry10 event/workshop.

These findings are important because they show that taking a class or workshop at a new studio sufficiently facilitates the growth of student networks so that they feel comfortable and excited to go back and take a regularly scheduled classes on their own. These encouraging data points strongly suggest that we are taking steps in the right direction to help the dancers realize some of the resources available to them, show them how powerful and fun this extra learning can be, and enhance their ability to take control of their own dance training and trajectory.



Based on this information, we would encourage dance studios, instructors and professionals to do more outreach to high school students and beginner dancers. With the availability of dance videos on youtube and the abundance of high school dance teams in the greater Seattle area, there are larger-than-ever numbers of self-taught dancers and those who discover their passion later in life. If we can reach those dancers and help them connect to

resources, they will have a greater chance of pursuing training opportunities such as classes and, hopefully, feel empowered to pursue their dance journey after high school.

Finally, as dance educators, we must also think outside the box of traditional classes. There are other topics and areas that young students are eager to know about and it can be a valuable learning experience for them to tackle these in a discussion or question and answer format.