

ENCOURAGING Creative Movement Choices IN TEACHING THE OLDER ADULT



MOVEMENT SPEAKS® performance at Central Harlem Senior Center.
Photo by Kelly Stuart.

ABSTRACT

This article discusses methods to encourage a range of movement choices in senior adult classes and instill an understanding of the mind–body connection, particularly with a population that is sometimes reluctant to improvise. Working with three basic ideas—class structure, muscle strengthening, and prompts for imagination—improves class attendance, enhances enjoyment, and builds a greater understanding of the benefits of practicing dance and creative expression in the population of older adults.

Naomi Goldberg Haas

Dances for a Variable Population, New York, NY

Older adults can benefit enormously from dance opportunities. Dance increases strength and mobility while providing a platform for self-expression and building community. I have spent the last thirteen years specifically focusing on this population. In 2005, I founded Dances for a Variable Population (DVP), a New York City–based organization, which promotes strong and creative movement among adults of all ages and abilities, with a particular focus on seniors. DVP develops programs that help build seniors’ modern dance skills, prevent physical and mental decline, extend their social networks, build their sense of personal power, and celebrate their capacities and strengths.

DVP’s programming includes a multigenerational performance company with members and guest artists aged from their twenties

to their nineties, which engages audience members not only as spectators, but also as participants. DVP's site-related performances have been presented in some of New York City's most iconic public spaces as well as internationally. In addition, we offer free, sequential, community-based programs (MOVEMENT SPEAKS® and Dances for Seniors) for low-income, minority, and culturally underserved older adults. The organization has engaged nearly 5,000 seniors in dance through free single sessions and sequential dance programming at more than forty-five senior and community centers in New York City since 2009.

ENGAGING OLDER ADULTS IN DANCE CLASSES

MOVEMENT SPEAKS, our core program, is currently held at seventeen sites across New York City. True to the mission statement of DVP, we honor the individual and meet them where they are at entry into the program, thereby ensuring their inclusion in the group experience of dance creation. We support and guide our program participants in ways suitable to their own unique needs, allowing them to become strong enough for free expression. Between twelve and thirty students typically study dance in each ninety-minute class. Classes are taught by teams of two or three teachers. Class planning and the playlist are determined by the lead teacher and distributed among the group as well as shared by all DVP staff. The plans align with our overall curriculum, which follows a sequential yet alternating structure of strength-building exercises and improvisation. Follow-up notes written by the lead teacher and read by the assistants, coteachers, and artistic director track classes and provide essential feedback. We support and guide our program participants in ways suitable to their own unique needs, allowing them to become strong enough for free expression.

Through our experience in growing these programs, we have developed best practices to ensure regular attendance and encourage creativity and enhanced mobility. These three strategies are critical to success:

1. Following a clear and repeated class structure.
2. Engaging in muscle-strengthening exercises.
3. Encouraging imagination while explaining its practical value.

Although all students come into the class with their own history of experiences, older people typically have core and limb strengthening needs. We frequently recognize, among this cohort, an apprehension to dance and creative movement despite possessing a strong desire to increase access to and engagement of imaginations. We have experienced the most success with this population through following a clear curriculum with an equal division of strengthening and improvisational exercises. The strengthening exercises enhance mobility, whereas the improvisational sections provide more freedom and individual choice. Older adults need both of these approaches: repetition in routine

and opportunities to make choices according to individual challenges and preferences. A consistent class structure that includes both sections is critical to achieving a successful class where the older adult can count on repeated exercises and also be surprised and interested enough by variations to stay engaged week to week. We find this consistency correlated to an increased level of agency for the older adult and corresponding satisfaction and sense of accomplishment. Clearly, for the teacher, an understanding of the importance of developing strength and the mind-body connection is crucial.

Sample Class Description

We have a systematic class structure that repeats each class. We begin seated in chairs. The first exercises involve a guided alignment and breathing: sensing a straight spine, balanced on top of the sit bones, ribs over pelvis, head over shoulders, breathing deeply through the nose. We continue, among other exercises, by lifting the knees to build awareness of hip flexor strength and use of quads connected to the core, using a march rhythm to stimulate sensation in the feet and to emphasize the importance of picking your feet up off the

MOVEMENT SPEAKS class at Central Harlem Senior Center.
Photo by Talya Charef.





MOVEMENT SPEAKS class at Central Harlem Senior Center.
Photo by Kelly Stuart.

floor to counter shuffling. This section lasts about fifteen minutes, shifting between moments of individual choice and teacher-led movements in building muscle strength and awareness. Older adult students can depend on this regular structure of alternating prescribed movement alongside creative improvisational choices. We encourage structured improvisation isolating body parts and ways of moving throughout the class. We ask dancers to connect with the way they feel, not with specific emotions but with attention to their own level of strength and ability.

Muscle Strengthening

It is essential for a teacher to have an understanding of basic anatomy and ways to train commonly needed areas of strengthening in older adults. For this reason, we often hire teachers with a fitness certification along with higher education dance training. Many adults suffer from sarcopenia, which is loss of muscle mass and strength that begins around age thirty and progresses throughout life (Villa-Forte 2018). The loss of strength can place increased stress on certain joints and predispose individuals to arthritis and falling (Villa-Forte 2018). Teaching older adults, a dance teacher must know what muscles commonly require initial and maintenance strengthening. These are the “practical” muscles used for common day-to-day life skills such as walking, lifting, pushing, and standing. Therefore, dance teachers working with this population benefit from an understanding of basic adduction and abduction, quadriceps strengthening, bicep curls, and triceps extensions. Increased muscle

strength leads to greater variations of improvisation, greater mobility, and greater clarity in form.

Some examples of exercises to increase mobility are walking while turning one’s head side to side (a balance practice) and mobilizing the shoulder with circular patterns of improvisation. As our teachers work with older adults, they use the correct anatomical terminology so that students learn what muscles and bones they are working with, increasing their awareness of how this leads to greater mobility. Over time, teachers and students see an increase in strength, mobility, and balance.

Encouraging Improvisation and Dance Making

In addition to supporting muscular strength, it is also important to address the mind-body connection. We are interested in students learning to use the body with the awareness of a dancer’s mind. This includes proper alignment and efficient movement, but also working with imagination.

Students develop an awareness of how the body can express the imagination of the mind. All of this work achieves greater mobility and creates opportunity for interesting choices, the long-term goal of all creative dance classes.

To nurture imagination, every class at DVP includes multiple sections featuring creative choices and improvisation. Imaginative choices are threaded throughout class. For these improvisations to be effective, the senior dancers need to understand that they can lead activities as well as follow them. Throughout the class, students are encouraged to improvise and explore. Dance making grows out of this exploration.

Whereas the first section of class follows a sequential alternating led and individual-choice strengthening and imaginative series of exercises, the last half-hour of class is dedicated to dance making. The course follows a sequential creative and choreographic curriculum involving a range of creative exercises. We use exercises working with partners and in groups. Mirroring and following, for example, is a simple and effective partner structure as long as the leader is clearly defined. The activity of mirroring and following also provides mental stimulation and concentration critical to brain health (Rehfeld et al. 2017). Additionally, the opportunity of dancing with a partner and perhaps moving into contact provides the immediate possibility of a different choice, including using counterbalance to encourage shifting of weight and strengthening of new points of balance.

For other dance-making exercises, we often work in small groups of five or six. We ask students to create shapes in space with others and move with varying dynamics. We often use prompts for use of spatial orientations such as circles, connected clumps, lines, and pinwheels. We also give descriptive prompts such as pointed, round, close, far, and

circling. The teacher might discuss the use of positive and negative space. Understanding where one's body parts are in relation to others improves proprioception, so that the older adult is less likely to fall or bump into someone or something. Finally, the social component of creating dance together connects older adults to each other, thereby building community.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Students sometimes question “why” we do a certain movement or exercise. One student, for example, only liked the exercise portion of class. We told her deep strength would come from the dance improvisation and creation routines, but she felt uncomfortable in this section. She needed an entry point. A partner stretch using a counterbalance of weight helped her enter the work. When she understood what “connecting forearms and stretching our backs” was as clearly as she understood “we are doing squats with our weight in our heels to build our quadriceps,” she changed her attitude. She could now see the benefits muscularly of the more loosely structured creative work.

Another student was attracted to freely moving but frustrated with her lack of mobility. She needed to build core strength. Once clear about her abdominals supporting her lower back, she could feel free to swing forward with the

upper body while sustaining balance on her legs with the support of strengthened quadriceps and a strengthened core. When one is studying dance, one is building experiences that help support vitality. Older adults need to know clearly and understand on both an intellectual and physical level that they are building strength and increasing movement potential.

As dance teachers working with this population, we seek for the students to experience a deep sensing of body parts through physical activity and imagination. In moving with strength and awareness, though, dancing also opens doors of possibility, which is particularly special to this group, as their worlds are often shrinking rather than enlarging. Regular exercise with alignment and practice provides physical strengthening, a positive at any age and a clear reason to dance.

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MOVEMENT SPEAKS class at the
George Bruce Library in West Harlem.
Photo by Kelly Stuart.

OUTCOMES AND REFLECTIONS

Thalia MacMillan (2016b), from Empire State College, conducted a study at six sites of DVP classes of 118 students between the ages of seventy-three and ninety-two. Students were surveyed at the conclusion of a nine-month weekly dance class session. Participants were asked about the effects of the program participation on their life. Macmillan's report, "MOVEMENT SPEAKS evaluation survey," stated that 91.9 percent felt that participation had positively affected their physical health, and 90.2 percent felt that their mood or outlook on life had been positively affected (MacMillan 2016b). Furthermore, 80.0 percent reported that the program has positively affected their interactions with other people (MacMillan 2016b).

The following are some of the specific comments by older adults in DVP classes that MacMillan (2016a) published in her article, "An Exploration of Older Adults' Perceptions and Motivating Factors Behind Movement Through Dance":

- ◆ "I have been dancing since I was a young girl. I liked the idea of taking part in a class where I would get to do that again with others."
- ◆ "I feel happy when I am dancing, so why not take a class that lets me do that?"
- ◆ "I am more aware of my body now. I am more conscious of it."
- ◆ "I hold my head up when I walk now, my posture is so much better. I have more confidence in my walking and my abilities. It's a great feeling to have."
- ◆ "This class has really helped me to be more flexible. I feel like I move my muscles more in the class than doing anything else and I like that as I'm not as stiff as I once was." (33–34)

These were very affirming results for DVP because they align with our goals. Students will stay committed to the classes if they can clearly see their own growth, and build a community through the class. In the same article, MacMillan (2016a) suggested:

[T]he exploration of the dance program revealed that individuals were attracted to a dance program for various types of exercise benefits, sense of community, and aspects of the program. They perceived various types of mental, physical, and social benefits, and felt intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors. While these varied by both locations, the findings reflect that both locations benefited from the creative expression of the dance. (29)


The experience of dancing allows older adults to move strongly, creatively, and joyously with others. This is such a rare and powerful opportunity. Strengthening one's body through the practice of dance, participating in an art form, and making new connections all enhance the quality of



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life for older adult students. One participant in the study summed it up for all of us, "Before I was moving, now I move with a purpose" (MacMillan 2016b). In the end, DVP's hope is to forge a love of lifelong dancing at any age.

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Address correspondence to Naomi Goldberg Haas, Founding Artistic Director, Dances for a Variable Population, 560 Riverside Drive 9K, New York, NY 10027. E-mail: naomi@dvpnyc.org