

Elliott Keller

Teaching Statement, 2021

History

My teaching history includes a decade of vast and varying experiences. Most recently, at The University of Utah, I've had the pleasure of teaching the following courses: Jazz Dance for Ballet & Modern Dance majors, Ballet for majors and non-majors, Modern Dance Technique for all levels of graduate and undergraduate students, Freshman Seminar for Ballet & Modern Dance majors, Dance Appreciation Online for undergraduate students, Movement in Culture for undergraduate Modern Dance majors, Social Dance for Ballet majors, Dance in Culture online for undergraduate students, History of Hip Hop online for undergraduate students, and Anatomy & Kinesiology for Ballet majors. Due to the pandemic, many of these courses have been a mixture of online instruction, in-person learning, or a hybrid.

My teaching has taken me abroad. I spent the summer of 2017 traveling throughout Argentina as a PizArts teaching fellow teaching workshops and seminars in Jazz and contemporary dance technique. In 2019, I went to Panama City, Panama to teach Jazz and contemporary technique with the group Movement Exchange. During my days working for Celebrity Cruises, I taught the ballroom and social dance classes on the ships in styles that included Swing, Foxtrot, Cha Cha, Salsa, Merengue, the Waltz, the Tango, and Rumba. I also taught Latin and Social dances in a number of private high schools while living in New York.

I've had the pleasure of serving as a master teacher and guest lecturer at American College Dance Association, University at Buffalo, SUNY Fredonia, and Nazareth College. And finally, I have an extensive background working in private studios throughout the country with students of all ages. I have taught Jazz, Ballet, pre-pointe, contemporary and modern dance technique, lyrical jazz, stretch and conditioning, musical theater dance, and tap.

Philosophy

At my core, I am both realist and optimist. I find myself most enamored with those who are able to move through life with feet planted firmly on the ground and a head that's higher than the clouds. There is an ever-present sense of duality in the way I understand the world, and I believe with every student I teach, I am trying to engender a similar feeling of simultaneous acceptance and hunger. Two things can be true, and it is my genuine hope that applying a similar approach to the classroom can create a space in which students of all abilities and identities are able to flourish. When we acknowledge and accept the hand we've been dealt, we move one step closer to self-actualization, making us more capable of achieving that which we may not have thought possible.

I believe good teaching enables a student to confront the reality of who they are in that moment while also illuminating a future in which there is much possibility. A dance education is not unlike the hero's journey, shaping and awakening the extraordinary that exists within the ordinary. In both classroom metaphor and thematic content, I find myself obsessed with ideas of “humanness” and magic. Whether it is movement invention or movement execution, I value the effortlessness of virtuosity and the burden of humanity. I want students to be honest. I want students to transcend their perceived limitations. I want them to feel emboldened and empowered and capable of translating a classroom task for any challenge they may encounter in the “real world”.

A classroom should be a sacred space in which both teacher and student show up with an open mind and a willingness to work. Though I am not advocating for a dissociative state in which one “leaves all baggage at the door”, there needs to be a sense of presence while in class, acknowledging that the work being done is bigger than any one person. There should be a reverence for the subject, and if there's not, is there still something to be learned? The study of anything should be like a mirror in which we discover more about ourselves. As a student, how can you approach taking class with generosity and kindness while still compelling the teacher to push themselves beyond their limits? You must be willing to take risks and allow yourself to be changed. Similarly, it is the responsibility of the

teacher to create an environment in which the student feels safe to ask questions, take risks, and be wrong. As a teacher, how do you demand excellence from both your students and yourself? How do you consistently remind yourself that excellence might look very different from learner to learner and body to body? How do you nurture in your students the idea that fair and equal are not necessarily synonymous and that a classroom should accommodate the needs of every individual? Are you able to sit in discomfort when you do not have all the answers? A teacher must stay current and engaged. A teacher must be excited about the subject and the field, keeping in mind that the classroom is not a static place of control, but a dynamic and shifting landscape. Complacency and the assumption that we've learned all there is to know is the death of teaching and learning.

I ultimately feel a great sense of responsibility for my students, and I believe that good teaching manifests through a sense of adaptability and an understanding that different personalities and different abilities require different care. I strive to create an environment in which students are willing to learn and are open to change, even in difficult moments. Nurturing a foundation of trust and mutual respect facilitates a relationship in which the most productive learning can be experienced. I believe good teaching liberates. I believe good teaching prepares. Teaching should be a vehicle through which we develop in our students a sense of humility, self-respect, compassion, and kindness. Dance can and should be a lens through which we gain a better understanding of this world, and as educators, it is our job to facilitate those connections for our students.

More than anything, I think it's crucial to foster a sense of love for dance and the moving body. The process of embodiment is critical to helping an individual cultivate a greater sense of self and identity, and my primary goal for my students is to leave the classroom feeling better about themselves than when they entered.