

# Teaching Modern Technique through Experiential Anatomy

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## Abstract

Incorporation of an experiential anatomy component into the modern technique class educates students about the body in a way that permanently and positively impacts how they move. It is our responsibility as dance educators, whether at the elementary, secondary, or college level, to teach students how to care for their bodies and make informed choices about how to move with efficiency. By exploring a different body part each week, students gain a deep understanding of their individual differences and how their body works best. Their dynamic range expands and they learn to self-correct. This methodology also provides teachers with new avenues for expanding their own movement vocabulary. Teachers and students who have never taught or taken anatomy will appreciate the non-threatening approach to the subject. For those who have studied anatomy or kinesiology, this approach offers tools to teach and experiment with the information in a new way. This article outlines how teachers can integrate this methodology into their classes and presents results achieved after teaching it to multiple populations for the past six years.

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Incorporation of an experiential anatomy component into the modern technique class educates students about the body in a way that permanently and positively impacts how they move. It is our responsibility as dance educators, whether at the elementary, secondary, or college level, to teach students how to care for their bodies and make informed choices about how to move with efficiency. In his book *Dance Imagery for Technique and Performance*, Eric Franklin writes, "Teachers should create a basis of knowledge and sensation that enables the student to make sound movement decisions. He then can create his own path and reach the highest of his abilities. The goal is to help the student to help himself."<sup>1</sup> Thanks to advances in our understanding of the body, dancers can look forward to longer performance careers and having the tools to make informed and intelligent decisions about how they want to train and move. The integration of experiential anatomy, even on a basic level, into the modern technique class helps students learn how to make educated choices about their bodies while simultaneously becoming dynamic, versatile dancers. Experiential anatomy can be integrated into college-level course as well as into lessons taught to students aged 12 to 18.

Although many kinesiology and anatomy courses include an experiential component, students do not necessarily understand how to integrate this information into their technique classes, rehearsals, and performances. The class format that will be described is not a substitute for anatomy or kinesiology. It is a spring-board into the body for students who have not had any body science classes and it serves as an in-depth investigation and review for

students who have had these courses. My experience has been that students benefit greatly from thinking about anatomical principles in an immediate way within the modern technique class. Often, the only area of the body in which a student becomes expert is one he or she has injured. In *Inspiring Students: Case Studies in Motivating the Learner*, Stephen Fallows and Kemal Ahmet point out that, "Experimentation is at the root of all science work."<sup>2</sup> Combining anatomy and modern technique brings the "science" of dance into the studio in an accessible, exciting way. Students who have taken anatomy or kinesiology are able to practice the principles they have learned and students who have not taken these courses are introduced to anatomy and kinesiology in an active, non-threatening way.

I developed this concept after witnessing my students' progress following a ninety-minute experiential anatomy class I taught. The following day I referenced the concepts we had discussed and saw beneficial results. Encouraged, I began to build an entire class around one body part and discovered that my movement vocabulary, direction changes, and spatial patterns varied far more than they had previously. Exploring one body part at a time with attention to different learning styles, provides a positive, engaging learning environment.

The experiential anatomy component guides the teacher into uncharted movement territory and helps get us out of repetitive movement vocabulary habits. If I am focusing on the hip joint for a unit, I will explore and build upon movement vocabulary that emphasizes the sensation of moving the hip joint. Simply bringing my own awareness to this area alters the pathways in which I move. As with so many things in life, creating restrictions results in freedom. In her book *Body Stories*, Andrea Olsen writes that "students hunger for information and experiences of the body," and reminds us that "you are your own textbook, lab, teacher."<sup>3</sup>

It is my hope that this article will open the door for teachers to step into this exciting experiential work. To develop a format I began to peruse my personal library for ideas on how to address certain body parts. I do not embrace any one book or somatic study, but I use many for inspiration and clarification. Each book on the Suggested Reading list has inspired me and guided me toward new perspectives on the body. I am particularly fond of Andrea Olsen's book and have used several of her experiential exercises at the beginning of my classes. One effective way of actively working with this approach to understanding the moving body is through units of study that focus on one joint or area at a time. I initially elected to focus on major

joints of the body, but as I have grown more comfortable with the format I have begun to explore some organs of the body, and more complex muscles like the diaphragm and the iliopsoas.

## General Advice

Before you get started there are some general concepts related to teaching in this manner that may be helpful:

1. You will not get to every body part in a quarter or semester.

2. You should explain to the students that no part works on its own. When we move one body part something else is working, moving in conjunction or in opposition. Students will gain an understanding of this as they progress through the units.

3. Start simply. This is a review or teaching tool for you as well as for them. Currently, I do not have the opportunity to teach kinesiology. As with a language, if you do not use it you lose it. In her book *Making Connections: Total Body Integration Through Bartenieff Fundamentals*, Peggy Hackney points out that Irmgard Bartenieff was constantly learning while she taught. "What she emphasized one year in her teaching might take a whole new slant the next year depending on what she had been exploring in the intervening time."<sup>4</sup> In other words, delve into an area *you* want to learn more about, or that you feel the students need. Ann Riordin, my pedagogy teacher at University of Utah, used to remind us that "the students will 'tell' you what you need to teach them. Just look around the room and you will see what they need." After a few days with a new group I know how I want to plan my units and which things I need to address first. When I first began to teach dance I always rehearsed my classes, and today I tell my pedagogy students to do the same. When I teach a new unit in experiential anatomy I practice it before introducing it to my students. I use index cards to organize my notes and bring them with me to teach the unit. Do not be afraid to use your notes as you would lecture notes.

4. During the opening experiences, as you guide students verbally, demonstrate the exercises on yourself or with a partner. Move around the room as you talk them through sequences in order to assist, answer questions, and keep things focused.

5. Become familiar with anatomical terms and begin to integrate them into your lessons. Sally Fitt's book, *Dance Kinesiology*,<sup>5</sup> has a comprehensive, non-threatening list of terms that are very helpful.

## Scheduling the Units

I arrange for the units to run for one to two weeks depending on the complexity of the area being

studied and the amount of time I have with the students. It is important to me to maintain the idea of modern technique class being a place where students get to dance. I try to keep each experience brief so that the class does not become an anatomy class. I want the students to have a small experience that can be applied and referred to throughout the modern class. The introduction of a new unit may run as long as ten minutes but the rest of the experiences will be no longer than seven minutes and sometimes as short as three minutes. Below is a guideline that may be helpful:

- If the class meets four or five days a week for ninety minutes, one week per body part is sufficient.
- If a class meets three times a week for ninety minutes then two weeks is necessary for most units.
- If a class meets twice a week for ninety minutes, sometimes three weeks are needed.
- If a class meets for sixty minutes or less, I often use the first ten minutes of one class each week for several weeks, or I make a decision to do a less in-depth exploration and spend one week on each part, allowing the anatomy component to serve as a sampler platter.

### Preparing the Unit

Study the body part you are going to teach and explore it from many different perspectives. Use several sources to provide you with various approaches to movement. I find that each text I use offers another idea about or view of an area. The Suggested Reading list at end of this article lists several books that offer exercises that can help deepen the understanding of a body part. I do not rely on one source but allow the books to create a full picture of an area that will help me teach to different learning styles. For instance, Franklin's books are helpful for creating images that help people who learn best through imagery. Andrea Olsen's book, *Body Stories*, provides several short, simple, but often profound experiences that fit into my plan. For instance, she includes an exercise that helps explain the way the talus bone slides under the inferior articulating surface of the tibia upon dorsiflexion (flexion of the ankle joint), and plantar flexion (pointing the foot). She gives the reader the image of tongs holding onto an ice cube. This exercise takes two minutes for students to do, and yet I can reference it throughout the class. The result is that students point and flex the foot with less unnecessary strain and tend to stop "pinching" the Achilles tendon when pointing.

Develop at least one experience either with partners or individually that explores the area *briefly*. These are little investigations that should last from five to ten minutes. I usually develop several explorations to use at the beginning of my classes. I teach one each day for at least three days. Then, for the last class or two of the unit, I dive in without the experiential anatomy work at the beginning, but go deeper into the phrase(s) we have been working on

Build a modern class with the area in mind. This does not mean that every exercise has to be addressing it in an obvious way. It simply means that you may want to call attention to it. However, creating movement phrases and sequences with the area as a priority has helped me expand my own vocabulary. I am forced to come up with more inventive and challenging ways to initiate movement. For example, if we are exploring the scapula, I consciously incorporate each action of the scapula into the opening torso warm-up. By bringing the awareness to it, I find new movement pathways that I might otherwise have missed. I find that the most rewarding and difficult component of the planning process is creating the movement phrases in the center and across the floor with a specific area in mind.

### Suggested Lesson Plan Outline

I will use the scapula as the area of exploration to demonstrate how the unit is put together. Before you begin this work you will want to present some ground rules for students to follow. I always tell students these things on the first day:

- Only talk about the experience at hand and do so quietly. Give each other verbal cues. A person may not be remembering to breathe or they may be tense in an area and need a verbal reminder. The person being worked on should feel free to tell their partner if the touch is not firm enough or is too hard, and so forth.
- Do not be afraid to ask me questions.
- Be firm with touch, not wimpy.
- This is not a massage session so be brief and thorough.

### Day One of the Scapula Identify the Scapula

Gather students around the skeleton. Locate the scapula and then trace it once, identifying all the borders, angles, and bony landmarks. Talk about how the scapula is freely floating on the ribcage and the only articulation it has is with the clavicle. Any movement of the scapula also involves the sternum as well as the shoulder socket. Franklin

describes the action clearly in *Dynamic Alignment Through Imagery*:

It is helpful to consider it a joint because the scapulothoracic motion cannot be separated from the shoulder's kinematic chain.... As the arm is elevated, the scapula rotates first around an axis located at the base of the spine of the scapula and then around an axis located at the acromio-clavicular joint. The S-shaped clavicle rotates to increase the elevation of its distal end to reduce the need for elevation where it joins with the sternum.<sup>6</sup>

### Trace the Scapula

Have students find a partner and guide them through the process of tracing the scapula on each other. Define the outline of the scapula – have them start at the spine of the scapula and trace laterally to the acromion process and then trace back along the spine of the scapula to the superior angle. Next have them trace down the vertebral border to the inferior angle. Finally, have them try to trace the lateral border, which is difficult to feel. Have them trace up to the area where there are several muscle attachments, near the armpit. When they have done this, have them switch places. *Tip:* If students have trouble finding the scapulae on one another, have the person being worked on shrug her shoulders a few times and her partner should be able to locate them.

### Identify Actions of the Scapula

Identify the possible actions of the scapula and have the students, on their own, do the actions as you say and do them – in this case:

- Elevation – shrug the shoulders up to the ears;
- Depression – let the shoulders return to neutral;
- Abduction – contract the chest or make it concave by bringing the shoulders forward making sure not to lift the shoulders toward the ears;
- Adduction – move the shoulders back so that the scapulae “squeeze” toward each other, again, being careful not to lift the shoulders up; and
- Upward rotation and downward rotation – from neutral, have them take their arms through second position very slowly to high fifth position to feel upward rotation, and then back down the same way to feel downward rotation.

### Identify and Feel the Scapula on a Partner

In partners again, have one student put her hands on her partner's scapulae as the class repeats the each action. Do the actions with the students as you say each one.

### Teach Your Modern Class

If you do a floor warm-up, draw attention to the body part as you do it. *Tip:* I do a floor warm-up at or near the beginning of my class that incorporates movement from several somatic studies such as Pilates and Bartenieff Fundamentals. I also include a few yoga postures. Every anatomical exploration can be addressed within the floor warm-up. Sometimes I simply draw attention to that area as we execute the floor series. This gives the students an agenda with material they know, so they can sink their teeth into the concepts without worrying about remembering what comes next.

Teach the remainder of the class with the scapula in mind. As I stated earlier, every exercise or phrase does not have to be specifically about the scapula but I have found great ways to do foot, tendu, and leg combinations by keeping the scapula in mind. I ask myself, “how can I incorporate motions of the scapula while working the feet, without doing standard arm movements?”

### Lesson Plan Outline: Day Two of the Scapula

#### Investigate the Scapula

Have students lie on the ground on their backs with knees bent, feet on the floor, and arms down by their sides. Review the actions of the scapula. Walk around the room saying and doing the actions as they do them on the floor. Talk to them about feeling what the scapula is doing on the floor as they do each action. Ask them to improvise port de bras movement on their own to feel what happens to the scapula as they move their arms.

#### Teach Your Modern Class

Continue with the previous class plan from floor work on.

#### Remainder of the Unit

For day three I include another mini exploration and, depending on how fast students retain movement material, I might complicate the warm-up combinations and add on to the phrase work.

For days four and five I continue to complicate or lengthen movement combinations and continue to draw attention to the scapula. With an advanced

class, I might begin a unit on the shoulder joint and integrating it with the scapula.

### Discoveries I have Made

I began to use this format with Level I college students who had taken some dance but no modern classes. I make decisions about which area to do based on the first day of class unless I already know my students well. However, a good place to start is with the articulation of the vertebrae and the three dimensionality of the spine. One of the biggest challenges is finding ways for students to understand the amount of mobility and articulation they have available to them. I may have them look at the whole spine one day and then have them look at an individual vertebra the next day. Below is an example of an order I use with beginners:

1. Whole spine;
2. Individual vertebra;
3. Scapula;
4. Hip socket;
5. Knee;
6. Ankle, tarsus, toes (all bones of feet);
7. Tibia and fibula;
8. Rib cage and sternum; and
9. Shoulder joint (tying in the entire shoulder girdle and drawing from the scapula, rib cage, spine information they had learned previously).

As the semester progressed with the Level 1 students, I became aware of the clarity and ease with which students were executing movement. I could tell them to think of rolling up from the front of their spine and they would understand. They moved with less unnecessary tension. I could use complex imagery with them, both external (i.e., relating body parts to the space around them) and internal detailed skeletal imagery, with successful results.

The following semester I taught our most advanced dancers. Many of them were seniors about to go to New York City to pursue a career in dance. They appreciated the chance to review what they had learned in kinesiology and to experiment with specific body parts in order to gain a fuller understanding of them and their relationship to the rest of the body.

The focus on specific parts of the body achieves significant results. Inexperienced dancers tend to move the spine in segments or chunks because they lack the understanding of how the spine moves and how each vertebra articulates with the next. By doing a spine exploration first, they begin to comprehend all of the parts of the spine

and its complexity. Another problem is that they think “surface” with the spine and they forget that there is an internal part of the spine and that it is indeed three-dimensional. By bringing this awareness to the foreground, they begin to move more three dimensionally, from their core, and with more density and less rigidity.

The scapula, rib, and shoulder girdle explorations have an almost immediate impact on the way students use their arms and torso. They incorporate the torso more and the arms do not move as if they are separate from the body. There is a sense of connectivity throughout the body.

Once students learn what and where the true hip socket is, they stop tucking when they lift the leg. They understand more about how not to shorten the torso while lifting the leg and they learn and *practice* the true hip rotation for their own bodies. This is often a profound discovery for them.

Showing students the bones of the foot on a model skeleton and then having them trace them on their own foot initiates an important process of articulation that helps them feel more solid on the floor with less tension. It also helps them understand how to transfer their weight better as they travel and move from open to closed positions. Experimentation with supination and pronation of the tarsus joint allows students to find their individual base for stability. I might begin a standing torso warm up in parallel and have the students do a small pronation and supination action, prior to finding the neutral stance in between. Identifying the bones that comprise the true ankle joint makes students aware of the hinging action of that joint. Students with short Achilles tendons can learn to release into the plié and not fight that individual restriction.

I recently taught a beginning modern class to students who were mostly non-majors. I used this format and conducted midterm meetings with each of them. Every person said that the experiential anatomy work affected their approach to movement. I saw the results each day, even with the least coordinated student in the class. Students were able to make corrections quickly even if the correction was not maintained consistently. One woman in the class who had an extreme anterior pelvic tilt and an accompanying problem with her ribs being “in front” of her pelvis completely corrected this after we explored the thorax. She can now feel the three dimensionality of the rib cage, especially the back of it. I asked her what helped. “Seeing the skeleton and then feeling things on our bodies helps me distinguish the difference

between what I *think* I am doing and what I am actually doing." She said she could "feel the back-space of the rib cage." She imagined filling the space behind her with her rib cage and yielding the front. This correction with the rib cage fixed the pelvic tilt problem.

I have been teaching this work to students ranging in age from 12 to 18 in summer programs in North Dakota and at American Dance Festival's Youth Program in Durham, North Carolina. These students are entranced by the work. They often come in the day after I have begun a unit and talk to me about the discoveries they are making in other classes and even in their dormitories at night. More importantly, when many of them return to studios where they study during the year, they continue to make these important connections. I have received many e-mails from them declaring things like this: "I really understand the way the arms attach to and are a part of the torso now!"

Generally, students dance with more clarity, less unnecessary effort, and a deeper understanding of the dynamic range available to them. Their transitions become smooth as they begin to see how movements connect. They pick up the essence of a phrase more quickly. I constantly refer to the body parts as we learn phrases. I am able to use imagery that helps with quality and execution, and they grasp the cues I give them swiftly. My advanced students make conscious decisions about how they want to execute movement. It is beautiful to watch them dance the phrases like mature, professional dancers.

## Conclusion

This work has helped me remain current and fresh in my approach to movement vocabulary. I am no longer relying on the things I am comfortable doing all the time. I find I do not repeat myself as often when I work this way. It has changed the way that I move. I have become more aware of my own tendencies.

The students come to expect this kind of work in the class. It has led to several discoveries for them. They say they feel empowered. When they take other classes they find they can see where a movement is initiated from quickly. They make choices that work for their bodies. I find that they do not need me to correct them as often. They self-correct much more readily. Ultimately, we end up with

more time for dancing, creating a rich technique class experience.

## Acknowledgment

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