

A Feminist Pedagogy Blueprint for Recreational Dance

**A resource for dance teachers
by Louise Marshall**

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This document is intended as a resource for anyone delivering within the recreational dance sector, including private dance schools, youth and community groups, exam and competition focused classes.

It is intended to promote reflection of teaching practice in relation to fostering a supportive and productive learning environment. It challenges practitioners to examine their delivery in relation to gender and gender identity and aims to be a functional resource to enrich the teaching of dance, especially to children and young people. The content aligns with community dance ethos and feminist pedagogy more broadly.

Five themes have been identified, each divided into three sub-headings. For each section an intention is stated (**I**), questions posed (**Q**) and suggestions made (**S**). Content that specifically relates to gender identity is highlighted. The supporting information document, 'Adopting a Feminist Pedagogy for Recreational Dance', provides references for further reading.



Social

PARTICIPANT CENTRED

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place the participant as central to the learning/teaching experience.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is the class for? • What do your participants already know/what can they already do? • What do they want to learn? What are they ready to learn? • Are you doing what you want to do or what your participants want to do? • Do you treat boys and girls the same?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow time to talk to participants about where they are at and what they want to do. • Allow opportunities for participants to say how they are feeling, both generally and about what they are doing in class, quick check in moments. • Be aware of your own agenda/expectations.

INTERACTION

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create a sense of community and connection with and between participants.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you allow questions throughout class?• Are participants encouraged to discuss their ideas?• Do you explain your ideas?• Do you ask for feedback from your participants?• Do you learn from your participants?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow for discussion and interaction in the session, whether or not topics seem directly relevant to the dancing.• Allow for working in pairs and groups.• Create opportunities for participants to share their skills with their peers.• Be prepared to explain what you want to do and why.

ENVIRONMENT

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide a safe space for participants to have fun, challenge themselves and explore their identity.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do you welcome participants on arrival? How do you welcome new participants?• Is there an opportunity to share how everyone is feeling?• Is everyone praised and encouraged equally?• Do you allow time for fun activities?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create opportunities for interaction.• Promote mutual support and encouragement.• Avoid comparison or competition.• Have fun.



Class content and structure

TECHNIQUE

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enable participants to learn new skills and extend their capabilities.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why are you teaching this technique? Is it essential?• How are you teaching this technique?• Do the participants actually understand what they are doing?• Do you need to demonstrate? Could you teach the class without any demonstration?• Are you setting achievable goals?• How recently have you updated your teacher training?• Could anyone participate in your class regardless of physicality, for example a wheelchair user?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide opportunities for self-evaluation and peer evaluation.• Focus on how movements feel and what the body is doing, rather than what it looks like.• Explain the background to the technique, how it has developed, why it has the features it does.• Encourage active learning – participants involved in how they learn as well as what they learn.

CREATIVITY

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable participants to discover and explore their own creativity within dance, allowing for personal and emotional expression.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What opportunities are there for participants to create their own movement? • How do you explain creativity in dance to them? • How do you expect them to express personal creativity?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow opportunity for participants to create sequences, sections of material, improvise and explore. • Use a variety of tasks to promote individual creativity. • Offer content that provides the opportunity to explore a wide range of movement qualities. • Provide opportunities to explore movement where there is no right or wrong response.

CHOICE

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable participants to express preferences and have some control over the content of the class.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does your class always follow the same format? • Are there opportunities to change the structure of the class? • Does the class follow the same structure as your teachers' classes when you were learning/training? • Do you stick to traditional gender roles?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At some point offer a choice of activity. • Hand over some responsibility to participants – ask them what they want to do. • Respect participant choices. • Offer different versions or options of material. • Offer gender neutral options.



The dance teacher's role

FACILITATOR

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Act as a vehicle for participants to progress in dance.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are you replicating the teaching you experienced?• Are the teaching methods used at a professional level appropriate for recreational dance?• Do you join in?• Where do you position yourself in the class?• Is it your role to control or engage the participants?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be aware you are a role model.• Be aware of the power relationship you have with participants.• Avoid replicating behaviours just because that is your experience.• Allow yourself to be vulnerable, admit what you don't know or can't do.

CHEERLEADER

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Act as an advocate and strong support for participants.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there a range of opportunities to recognise individual strengths in the class? • Are individual and group achievements celebrated in a non-competitive manner? • Do you regularly praise your participants and recognise progress?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage participants to share their skills with the class, for example taking turns to lead in a warm-up, teaching a move or sequence to the class. • Recognise that participants want to please their teacher. • Show that you care about your participants both inside and outside the dance class. • Praise, praise, encourage, praise.

CHALLENGER

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable participants to learn new skills and move out of their comfort zone in order to develop as dancers.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are participants ready for a new challenge? • Is everyone at the same level in the class? • How do participants feel when they try something difficult and succeed or not? • How will you manage failure?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear about your aspirations with and for participants. • Encourage risk taking in a safe and supportive environment. • Emphasise personal development and individual improvement, 'being the best you can be'. • Be specific with feedback, both on who it is to and what it is about.



Tools of the trade

MIRRORS

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use mirrors as a constructive, non-judgemental teaching tool.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you use the mirrors actively?• Could you teach without the mirrors?• What are the mirrors for?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Face away from the mirrors whenever possible.• Make a conscious choice to use the mirrors for a specific purpose, such as for self-evaluation.• Encourage participants to learn how movement feels.• Explain how movement is initiated, which muscles are used, how to use the breath.

LANGUAGE

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use appropriate and non-discriminatory language that promotes inclusion and diversity.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you collectively call your participants? Guys? Girls? • Are you making assumptions about gender, sexuality, cultural or socio-economic background? • How would a non-binary individual feel about the language you use? • What language do you use to describe movement qualities?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use language that is non-specific. • Avoid gender stereotypes when describing the actions of boys and girls. • Listen carefully to lyrics and meaning when selecting music.

TOUCH

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use touch appropriately in class as a teaching tool and learning sensation.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will the use of touch help a participant to understand what they are trying to achieve? • Can it be explained or demonstrated in an alternative way? • Is touch part of the creative process or performance, such as a duet?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilise partner and group activities to introduce appropriate touch into the dance class. • Always ask permission, every time, if using touch to explain movement or position. • Invite participants to use touch on themselves, feel their own muscles and joints as part of learning. For example, self-massage/ rubs as a warm-up activity, brushes as a cool down. • Emphasis the feel of the body on the surfaces it is in contact with – the floor, the wall, the barre. • Use proper language for body parts. • Treat boys and girls the same.



Body awareness

CLOTHING AND COSTUME

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensuring participants are comfortable and confident to move.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you need to have a uniform or dress code? Is it affordable?• What do the participants want to wear?• Do you need to be able to see their bodies?• Does it matter what participants wear?• Do costume clothing/choices discriminate against gender, for example heeled shoes?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognise the potential impact of tight-fitting clothing on participants self-consciousness.• Offer a range of options to ensure there are variables for all body types.• Be prepared to be flexible and to discuss the options.• Make sure you have a good reason for any restrictions, such as safety.• Recognise the impact of puberty on adolescent bodies, physically and psychologically.

MOVEMENT CHOICES

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection and promotion of age-appropriate movement that will develop skills.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are all the movements suitable for the age group? • What are the influences on the participants re movement? • Are there opportunities to discuss influences from social media and popular culture? • Are you replicating moves from the professional sector, performed by adults? • Is the movement different for boys and girls? • Who or what is the movement/choreography for?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on what participants are doing not how they look. • Allow participants to explore a full range of movement options and qualities. • Adopt gender neutral sequences that include a range of qualities. • Recognise the influence of popular culture and social media on young people. • Emphasise healthy and safe dance practice, inside and outside the dance class.

ACHIEVEMENT

I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of self-confidence and positive body image.
Q	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have success points throughout the class? • Is the class target driven? Are these targets achievable? • Is the focus on how participants look or what they can do?
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build in class sharings and informal performances, celebrating individual and collective progress. • Avoid comparing individuals. • Focus on the movement, what participants are doing rather than what they look like. • Acknowledge all achievements and progress, not just the physical. • Seek out suitable opportunities for your participants to perform externally.

Adopting a feminist pedagogy for recreational dance

- This document draws on the conclusions of the Research Report ‘Developing a Feminist Pedagogy for Recreational Dance: An investigation into the impact of participation in dance activity on attitudes of adolescent girls towards femininity’ (Marshall, 2020). This project investigated the experiences of recreational dance by adolescent girls in the Highlands, Scotland, but the pedagogy can be applicable to any recreational dance context. It is intended as a tool for dance tutors, posing questions for reflection of teaching practice and providing suggestions for planning sessions. The aim is that it is easy to read and easy to apply.
- Recreational dance refers to any dance activity that is not vocational training or professional, including private dance schools, syllabus/exam-based classes, community classes and projects, youth dance, competition dance and classes that are purely for fun. Some tutors may work in this sector full time, others may do it in addition to other employment. The assumption is that all teachers of recreational dance do it because they are passionate about sharing their love of dance.
- Recreational dance has historically been the poor relation of the dance world, with the hierarchy placing professional performers and choreographers at the top (Risner, 2010). But the recreational dance sector reaches more people than any other part of the dance industry, from toddlers upwards. It has the potential to have huge impact, not only on participants’ ability to dance, but also as a medium for personal development and social change (Lomas, 1998).
- The blueprint falls under a feminist frame as it is based on the experiences of adolescent girls and female dance teachers and it aspires to make a difference to the experience of all those

attending recreational dance classes, with the acknowledgement that the vast majority identify as female (Risner, 2007). This does not exclude those identifying as male, as the pedagogy places the learner at the centre, aligning with feminist pedagogical principles. But the blueprint is not a formula. It requires each dance tutor to reflect upon their own practice and the experience of their participants.

- Gender stereotypes are deeply embedded within the culture of dance, from the roles danced to the qualities embodied (Oliver & Risner, 2017). Dance itself is primarily viewed as a feminine activity, or an activity that embodies attributes historically perceived as feminine (Ferdun, 1994). All those working in the recreational dance sector are fully aware of the predominance of girls, who will be most impacted by any stereotypes and detrimental behaviours. As dance tutors we have a responsibility to educate the whole student, physically, mentally, emotionally and socially (Werbrouck, 2004).
- Often, teaching in the recreational dance context follows professional examples, with teachers replicating the transmission model that they experienced in their own training (Lakes, 2005; Mills, 2019). Participants learn about the expectations of the dance culture as much through how they are taught as what they are taught (Stinson, 2005). What is not said can be as significant as the explicit instructions.
- The blueprint is informed by a wealth of literature in the field of dance education, advocating for reform and learner-centred pedagogies. The traditional formats have been heavily scrutinised from various perspectives and there is a general recognition that the teaching of dance needs to evolve to meet the circumstances of the 21st century (Lakes, 2005; Smith, 1998; Stinson, 1998 & 2005). The blueprint presents options that can incorporate the positive aspects of a traditional pedagogy as well innovations in practice.

- The blueprint aligns to the People Dancing Professional Code of Conduct which identifies the core values and professional responsibilities of community dance delivery (People Dancing, 2020). It reflects the four capacities outlined in the Curriculum for Excellence, encouraging ‘confident individuals’ and ‘successful learners’ in particular (Education Scotland, 2004). It also supports the Scottish Government policy ‘Getting It Right For Every Child’ (2020), especially the eight wellbeing factors defined in the document. This, in turn, directly links to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef, 1989) and the Scottish Government Human National Performance Framework which respects and defends human rights based on the protected characteristics (Scottish Government, 2018).
- Many of the suggestions and questions will seem obvious, and most dance tutors adopt good practice without needing to be told what to do. However, reflection on teaching practice can only enhance the experience for participants. Five key areas have been identified from the research as impacting on the experience of the dance participant. The blueprint is not dictatorial, rather discursive. It is certainly not exhaustive and there are areas of overlap between the themes and sub-headings, making it a fluid document.
- **Themes:** The five themes were identified from the discussions with four adolescent participants identifying as female and four dance tutors, plus questionnaires with larger groups. Many of the issues were directly referred to and some were evident from the analysis of the conversations. The following paragraphs summarise the factors which had the most impact on the experience of the participants in recreational dance classes.
- **Social:** Many responses specifically referred to the social aspects of the dance class, emphasising making new friends, having time to chat, and dancing together. There was appreciation of opportunities to work in pairs or smaller groups, and time for interaction with the teacher. This sense of connection and

community strongly contributed to enjoyment of the class and enabled participants to feel more relaxed, and thus more willing to challenge themselves. A feminist pedagogy advocates placing the learner(s) as central to the experience (Barr & Oliver, 2016). Rather than a tutor deciding what participants need to learn, they can explore the options with their participants, learning alongside them. This contributes to participants perceptions of self-worth as they are being met as equals, their ideas and abilities being valued. By creating a safe and supportive environment the dance teacher ensures all participants can progress their technique and express their individuality.

- **Class Structure and Content:** Participants preferred a mixture of content within the class. At times they appreciated the challenge and escapism of learning a sequence set by the tutor, enjoying learning new skills and technique and the sense of accomplishment and pride in their body when they achieved new moves. They particularly enjoyed moments when, dancing as a group, they succeeded in performing a sequence together, strengthening the sense of connection through communal achievement. They also valued opportunities to create their own sequences and movements, either individually or in pairs or small groups. This gives opportunities for emotional expression, personal development and collaboration when working with others (Fitzgerald, 2017). By changing the structure of the class, it kept sessions engaging and provided different opportunities for individuals to discover and demonstrate their strengths. Opportunities to choose activities were also appreciated.
- **The Teacher's Role:** The teacher ideally acts as a facilitator to learning, rather than dictating the content and direction of the dance class. This involves listening to participants, discovering their aspirations and preferences, and providing genuine opportunities for every individual's development. It still means challenging participants when appropriate but being prepared to explain the reasons why and collaborate when opportunities

arise. Dance teachers need to recognise they are role models to their participants and that there is a power dynamic in the relationship (Risner, 2008a & 2010). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the teacher to generate an environment where participants can ask questions and discuss concerns. Support, praise and encouragement create positive relationships and outcomes so the teacher should be the cheerleader for their participants, highlighting progress and achievement.

- **Tools of the Trade:** Ideally, teachers utilise a variety of methods to support the learning of their participants. Used constructively the mirror can enhance dance technique and performance but as a constant presence that is not actively utilised it can lead to self-criticism (Barr & Oliver, 2016). Language should also be carefully considered, avoiding generalisations that may exclude individuals, and following stereotypes embedded in dance culture. The sensations of touch are intrinsic to dance, whether feeling the sensations in one's own body or when dancing with someone else. Touch can support learning but must be used respectfully and appropriately, always with consent. Dance is also an opportunity to normalise non-sexual touch.
- **Body Awareness:** The body is the medium of expression for dance therefore central to the dance class experience. The body is also intrinsically linked to gender, therefore dance can provide a means for the exploration and expression of gender identity (Risner, Godfrey & Simmons, 2004). By offering a range of movement and qualities, avoiding stereotypes, participants can explore their physical ability and investigate their gender identity as represented through movement (Kahlich, 2001). Clothing and movement choices may impact on participants' body-image, leading to excessive scrutiny or repression. Providing lots of opportunities to succeed will contribute to participants sense of achievement, their confidence in their physical ability and pride in their body.

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