

Jennifer Black (Dance)

The original announcement on March 10th, 2020 was that Kent State was closing down for a few weeks but would resume two weeks after spring break seemed like a challenge, but a doable one. I began researching and compiling dance videos for the students to do. There were things that I wanted them to learn that I have little experience in, such as yoga, or barre exercise techniques. With my usual “find the silver lining” attitude, I thought that this was a good opportunity for students to learn something that may possibly help them in the future. But when the announcement was made that remote learning was permanent for the rest of the semester, I had to once again reassess the classes and change my goals for my students.

There are many challenges when teaching an online dance class. While some teachers chose to have students learn the mental aspects of dance, I preferred to have the students keep moving. As a person that is constantly in motion, I found it very difficult to sit at a computer all day. My first experience with zoom was not great. I found it very difficult to see the students and physically teach them combinations at the same time. Students had trouble with the connection. Many of them would hear the music later than I did, or their computer would just freeze. Not only do the students have no space, incorrect floors, and no mirrors, many students were unable to “dance” at the time that class was scheduled because they were also sharing their home space with other family members who were also teaching, learning, or working from home. I found that the best way to deal with these unforeseen challenges was to give the students options. I posted the weekly assignments late on Sunday night and took them down late on Friday night. This would allow them the opportunity to dance when they had the time and space to do it the best they can. The content of every week was different, however, it was usually the option of a video or zoom class, followed by a discussion and one video showing me a step or combination that they learned that was due at the end of the week.

As far as the videos were concerned, I found many videos on YouTube that were helpful. It took hours of research, but there were several that gave good content, advice, or class that was perfect to do at home. I also used a site called Danceplug that had a few tap combinations or warm ups that I thought the students can learn. And if there was no video with the goals I had in mind for the class, I would create the video in my basement and put them on YouTube myself. Some of the students had difficulty “mirroring” the images and found it challenging to learn combinations that way, however, I also think that learning from a video is a useful skill to have for any students that find themselves in a dance company or show that is recreating their pieces by learning it through video. What I liked about Danceplug is the different ways the combinations were taught. It was taught fast and slow, through mirror imaging or from the back so that the student can find what was best for him/her. The tap combinations were especially helpful because of the split screen used which allowed us to see the full body as well as just the footwork, so it was easier to follow.

I am extremely fortunate to have a small dance studio in my basement. While I rarely use this space in my day to day life, I was beyond grateful to have marley floors, mirrors and a ballet barre in my home! After researching several virtual platforms, I chose to pay for zoom pro. It

allowed me to see all the students at the same time. After several tries, I found that changing my mind set on how and what the students were learning was helpful. First of all, I simplified all the combinations. I would teach it so it was easy to remember, then I was able to watch them while saying the combination through my computer screen. Obviously, it was going to be difficult for students to turn in the floors they were forced to use. Therefore, I focused on balances and the proper preparation instead. I was also able to focus on ballet barre, technique, small jumps, strengthening and stretching. These are all things that I believe my particular students needed to work on anyway.

Everyday was followed by a discussion on what they did, and what the challenges were for the day's class. At the end of the week, they sent me a video. The weekly videos consisted of either a combination, a project, or something simple such as an arabesque. The students would review the video and tell me how he/she can do that step better. I would give them feedback as well. It was a great way for the students to see themselves (since they no longer had mirrors) and to analyze how they can improve.

While I think that this is obviously not the best way to hold a dance class, I truly feel that the students that chose to do the work still learned something from it. Obviously, the goals for all my classes had to change. But it allowed me to focus on the intricate challenges that students have such as an arabesque, their turnout, or even just their feet. It also allowed the student to learn how to be independent. For the many seniors who plan on moving to places such as NYC soon, they now have a plethora of videos and have learned different ways to keep dancing in their tiny NYC apartments. I have also made a list of all the videos we have used so that the students can easily access them and continue to dance all summer long. Students and teachers were forced to think outside of the box in their teaching, choreography and projects. While many students may have had difficulty with the situation as well as staying motivated and consistent, I believe that those that have managed to rise to the occasion will find themselves successful with other challenges in future careers.