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# Teaching Dance for Understanding: Reconceptualizing Dance in Physical Education

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Imagine students walking into a gymnasium and being coached to confidently show their own style and move differently than their peers as they learn dance moves and combos. Contrast this experience with students walking into a quiet gymnasium, being put into lines, facing the front, learning a series of dance combinations through a part-whole structure, before being instructed to replicate their teacher's movements. Both of these methods of teaching dance can be developmentally appropriate and can promote physical literacy; however, one method may be more suitable for physical education class, and better engage students through success-based experiences. How does a teacher foster this sense of play, enjoyment and confidence? By changing the framework they use to teach dance. Currently in physical education classes, many educators adopt the "skills-and-drills" approach to teaching dance. First, students learn the skills and technique in isolation, and then they dance. While the skills-and-drills approach can be successful, it does not always capture the varying levels of competence in the physical education setting. The same way that Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) flipped the way physical educators teach sports, Teaching Dance for Understanding (TDfU) maximizes participation in dance and effectively engages students to move through play, exploration, skill refinement, and, finally, performance.

While the teaching games for understanding (TGfU) model has been used since 1982 to engage students in learning sport-specific skills (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982; Johnson & Walker, 2016; Mitchell, Oslin, & Griffin, 2006), the idea of teaching dance for understanding is in its infancy. The objectives for both the TGfU and TDfU curricular models are similar. The goal of TGfU is to provide students

the opportunities to make strategic decisions and problem solve during game situations (Johnson & Walker, 2017), while the goal of TDfU is to provide students the opportunities to first build a movement vocabulary and a positive attitude and mindset toward dance (curiosity), and then build on the success by layering complexity toward a final performance. This new framework for teaching dance, if implemented properly, provides K–12 students with the tools to be physically literate, lifelong dancers.

Dance, in all of its forms, goes beyond mastering a series of steps. Dance is an ideal tool through which to teach students about physical literacy, movement concepts, self-worth, self-expression and relationships. Dance is also a large and rich part of our culture and our society. Students engage in dance to express their cultural identities, to problem-solve, to convey artistic ideas, and strengthen their social interactions (Melchoir, 2011). Although music and dance are popular pastimes in the United States, physical education teachers often feel anxious when asked to teach it in a physical education setting (Wirszyla & Gorecki, 1998). Some physical educators express that they have not been formally trained in how to teach dance (Russell-Bowie, 2013), that they "have no rhythm," and that they are confused about how to correctly structure a dance unit (Wirszyla & Gorecki, 1998). Although there are already a variety of frameworks for teaching dance (Hodgson, 2001; Melchoir, 2011; Strachan & Lee, 2013), preservice teachers still identify that they feel ill prepared to create and facilitate a successful dance unit (Russell-Bowie, 2013).

## Why Dance?

SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Education *National Standards and Grade-Level Outcomes (GLOs) for K–12*

*Physical Education* highlight what physically literate students should know and be able to do (SHAPE America, 2014). In every grade level, from kindergarten through high school, there are grade-level outcomes related to dance. Ignoring dance as a unit due to lack of training is, in essence, ignoring countless GLOs. In fact, 11.15% of elementary GLOs, 6.47% of middle school GLOs, and 27.12% of high school GLOs are directly related to teaching dance (Marquis & Metzler, 2017). These statistics do not even take into account the outcomes that do not overtly mention dance, but that could include dance. Providing current and future physical education teachers with the tools necessary to confidently teach dance should be a high priority in physical education teacher preparation programs. The TDfU model, created by Melanie Levenberg, echoes the TGfU model that is familiar to many physical education practitioners, and it provides a framework from which physical educators can feel better prepared to confidently teach a dance unit.

## Why TDfU?

TDfU was created out of a need to better engage students in a physical education program. The model focuses on increasing moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA), while developing fundamental movement skills, and promoting positive attitudes and confidence in a program that students can use in other areas of their lives.

The TDfU model was created to mirror the existing TGfU model (Table 1). Both of these models are based on the observation that students sometimes find it difficult to transfer skills into practice out of context. In both models students are first engaged in a small-sided game or a dance with modified rules upon entry

**Table 1.**  
**TGfU and TDfU Comparison**

TGfU	TDfU
<b>Game Form:</b> play a small sided game form with modified rules and structure	<b>Dance as a Playful Experience:</b> engage in dance with modified rules and structure
<b>Game Appreciation:</b> trying out a version of the game in a small group	<b>Dance Appreciation:</b> exploring the elements of dance (Laban's Framework, B.A.S.T.E. etc.)
<b>Tactical Awareness:</b> understanding common elements/strategies in games and why they are needed	<b>Developing Connections:</b> exploring connections to the music, to self, to peers (interpersonal skills), to prior knowledge
<b>Decision Making:</b> using tactics in dynamic environments during game forms	<b>Creative Exploration:</b> using the elements of dance to create dance movements and combinations
<b>Skill Execution:</b> practicing the skills in game situations and preparing to play	<b>Skill Refinement:</b> refinement of movements and preparing a dance performance
<b>Performance:</b> applying new skills in a game	<b>Dance Performance:</b> applying skills in performing a student-created dance



**Figure 1.**  
**TDfU model graphic**

into class. The skills, concepts, and higher-level thinking about the sport or the dance develop over the course of the unit, with the end result being an increased understanding and competence, which leads to the ultimate goal of curiosity for more exploration and a confidence to move for a lifetime.

**What Is TDfU?**

Teaching Dance for Understanding is a model for teaching dance that immerses students in authentic dance experiences — and encourages students to gain confidence, explore creatively, build a movement vocabulary, and refine

skills along the way (PHYSEdAgogy, 2016). This model is rooted in the constructivist theory that knowledge is created and not just discovered. Asking students to “move creatively” is intimidating, especially if they have not been given the tools or foundation in which to move creatively. When students can develop a foundational movement vocabulary, are taught more about dance, and are given a better framework to understand concepts and principles, they will approach the learning process in a more meaningful way.

The TDfU model is a 6-step process that begins with a “playful experience” and ends with “dance performance.” Practitioners are encouraged to begin at

step one and make their way around the complete circle (see Figure 1). According to the SHAPE America standards and grade-level outcomes (SHAPE America, 2014), students do not need to choreograph their own dance until 4th grade, so it is acceptable to have your younger students work on the foundations of dance, and stay longer in steps 1–4 without progressing to steps 5 and 6.

As a practitioner, spend sufficient time in each of the steps to ensure your students are gaining the knowledge to build their confidence. Exposing students to each of the steps without providing the appropriate depth may result in students who lack confidence to move their bodies in creative ways or explore movement as intended.

**Table 2.**  
**Web Resources for Teachers to Access Further Information**

Source Name	Web Link
TDFU Webinar	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCUyNSvkLI&amp;t=19s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCUyNSvkLI&amp;t=19s</a>
How to choreograph a playful dance for phase 1	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyXnW2U4rrU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyXnW2U4rrU</a>
TDFU in Middle School	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kxl-DOA5Jf8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kxl-DOA5Jf8</a>

Ideally, you can devote an entire class period to each of the steps. For instance, in a 6-day dance unit teach a new step each day, with performances on the final day. Some educators have also successfully combined steps 2–3 or 3–4 in one lesson.

### *Step 1: Dance as a Playful Experience*

- What’s included in this step?
  - In step 1 the instructor leads students through engaging choreography that focuses on fundamental movements and fundamental concepts (e.g., a tap and a leap). The teacher uses popular, upbeat music and encourages students to follow along while moving through the gym. Students move through the space (not worrying about a “lead” foot), while the teacher cues in students when the movement changes (see [Table 2](#)).
- Why is this Step 1?
  - By having students engage in this playful style first, students physically experience a class setting where they “can’t get it wrong,” which builds a positive attitude/mindset about what dance can be.
- What is the major take-away for teachers?
  - Find music the students enjoy
  - Use a variety of fundamental movement skills (e.g., students can walk for 3 counts and then jump on the 4th count during the song verse)
  - See [Table 2](#) for links to sample playful choreography

### *Step 2: Dance Appreciation*

- What is included in this step?
  - In step 2 students are asked to take a more cognitive approach to dance. Practitioners may teach them dance vocabulary, and even the history of genres of dance. Ask your students to find similarities

or differences between the movements used in one dance genre versus another. For instance, what is the difference between the way people move to West African music versus the way people move to polka music? Students in this step can also learn the elements of dance, using Laban’s Framework or B.A.S.T.E. (see [Figure 2](#)).

- Why is this step 2nd?
  - Gives students who need the cognitive understanding of something before they are willing to try more “fuel” for their creative fires later on. It allows students to learn cultural and symbolic aspects of dance as a form of art and physical activity.
- What are the major take-aways for teachers?
  - Find an elements of dance poster to hang up or project on the wall (Fasteneau, 2018)
  - Have students engage in a variety of genres of dances or watch short clips to compare using movement vocabulary

### *Step 3: Developing Connections*

- What is included in this step?
  - In the 3rd step students begin to make connections with music, rhythm, muscles, emotions, prior knowledge, and peers. Students continue to interact with the music or with self-generated rhythms (e.g., stomp combos) and build new knowledge that, in turn, enhances competence.
  - During this step students should be made aware of song structure and how to count out the 32 counts to perfect their dance.
  - In this step students can listen to a variety of music from different cultures, genres and eras. Students can be encouraged to express through words how the music makes them feel, before showing with their

bodies. This step leads into creative exploration with bodies, and it is a wonderful link between words and physical movement.

- Why is this step 3rd?
  - Now that students have been introduced to more dance terminology, they can better express how music makes them feel, and it empowers them to listen to music and understand how it makes them want to move.
- What are the major take-aways for teachers?
  - All students need this — not just primary
  - Critical step in middle school — if the skill of connecting to music isn’t retrained, this is where many students “lose their rhythm” due to growth spurts in puberty
  - Use isolated rhythmic activities and games in this step (drumming, stomping, self-guided rhythm games)
  - Use the elements of dance posters and encourage students to identify how different music makes them want to move (see [Figure 3](#))
  - With younger grades, write student responses on a whiteboard

### *Step 4: Creative Exploration*

- What is included in this step?
  - Students now progress to moving their bodies creatively to the music. Students can be given dance vocabulary (for instance, “arms” and “slash”) and can be asked to use the words to create a dance and move along to the beat of a song. Students can be challenged to use the same dance move to a variety of different songs, or to use the same movement words to create a variety of dance moves. Students are now empowered to move creatively with autonomy, but within the framework of 4-counts or 8-counts.



Figure 2.

**B.A.S.T.E. elements of dance posters in physical education teacher preparation class**

- Why is this step 4th?
  - If students are asked to move creatively too early, they may be hesitant to move at all. Students should be asked to move creatively once they have been given a framework for how their body can move.
  - By this step of the dance unit, most students are excited and actively requesting to create their own moves!
- What are the major take-aways for teachers?
  - Students will “be creative” by making up their own dance moves using one or more of the elements of dance (teacher provided or student choice)
  - Challenge students to find more than one way to use their chosen words (for example, “I see you are slashing your arms, can you pick another body part to slash?” or “I see you and your partner are working with the same words...can you mirror or match each other?”)
  - Verbal reinforcement is critical in this step. Remind students that when they are moving creatively and add in their own ideas and style, they “can’t get it wrong.”

**Step 5: Skill Refinement**

- What is included in this step?
  - In this 5th step, students use all the tools they have to create a dance based on the criteria set by the teacher.

- Creating a dance could be as simple as all students using the elements of dance to build a 32-count sequence that they can perform in unison with a group. For instance, students can all be asked to choreograph a 32-count dance to the chorus of the song “Waka Waka” by Shakira. When the chorus comes on, all groups can simultaneously perform their 32-count in different parts of the gym.
  - To provide more autonomy, allow students in grade 4 and above the option of choosing their own (school-appropriate) song from a list of songs that the teacher has vetted.
  - The groups are responsible for creating any movement that represents the element of dance assigned, for the number of repetitions assigned.
- Why is this step 5th?
  - By this step, students should be equipped with the tools to understand that dance is a series of related, controlled movements. It is now the students’ responsibility to work together and highlight what they know. Enough time should have been spent on the previous steps to ensure students are confident to execute moves on a beat.
- What are the major take-aways for teachers?
  - Teachers can co-create a dance with students. For instance, the

teachers can lead students through their choreography for the verse of a song, with individual students or small groups performing their 32-count choreography sequence during the chorus.

- Some students may excel at this step and be full of ideas, while others still may need a framework. Use your dance vocabulary to help students who need more guidance.
- Provide guidance with graphic organizers (for example, highlighting that a 32-count can be made of four individual, but linking, 8-counts)
- In this step a process of rehearsal, teacher or peer-review and refinement is important to allow for the physical integration of skills
- Challenge students who excel. Some may wish to choreograph a dance for multiple 32-count sections. Teachers and peers should provide formative feedback to help the students bring a polished dance to the final step.

**Step 6: Dance Performance**

- What is included in this step?
  - In this final step students will perform their dance. Performance can vary based on the structure of the unit. As noted previously, you may have all students choreograph their 32-count to the same song chorus and they can all perform their dance at the same time, or

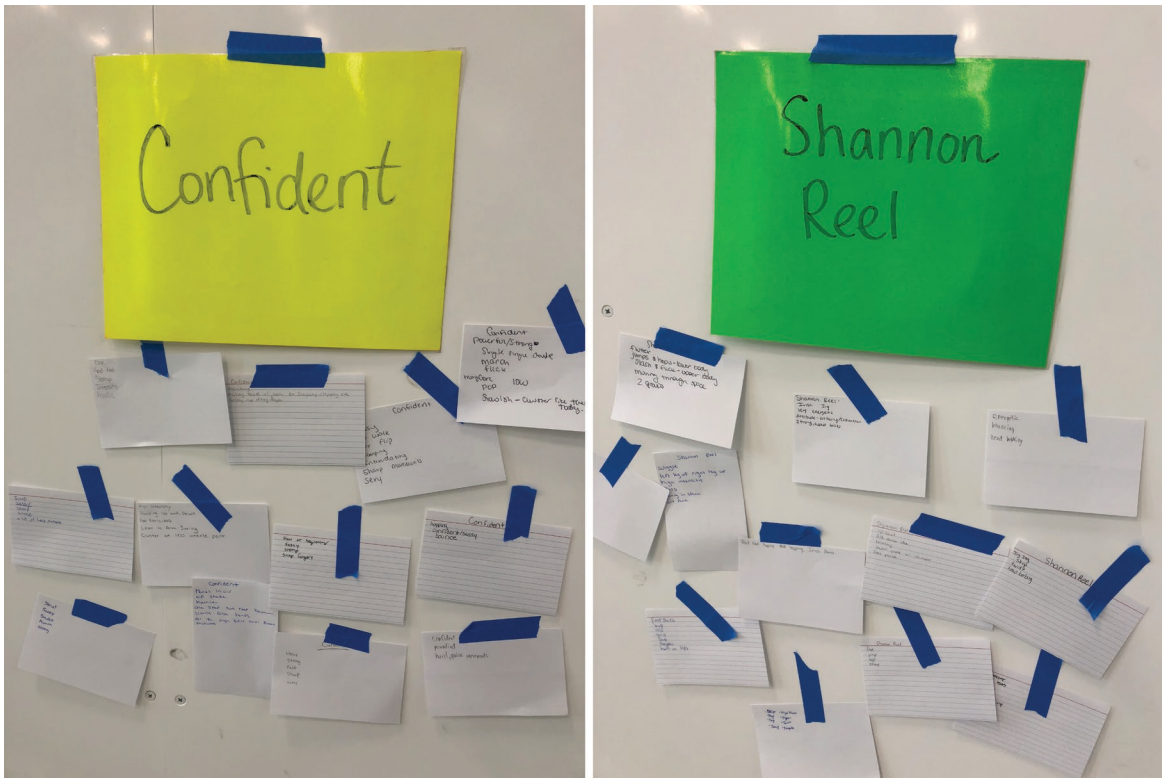


Figure 3.

**Student generated responses of how music made them want to move their bodies during phase 3**

- they may take turns performing if they all picked their own songs.
- Why is this step 6th?
  - One goal of the TDFU model is to provide students with the tools and practice opportunities to use the elements of dance to create and perform a dance with confidence.
- What is the major takeaways for teachers?
  - Videotape the final performance to use as a summative evaluation.

structure a successful dance unit in their future physical education programs. If this model is followed in teacher training programs, then it is possible that more K–12 students will develop the competence, confidence and motivation to stay active for life with dance.

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**Future Direction of Dance in Schools**

Having a new, relevant methodology for teaching dance can help both preservice and current teachers feel more prepared to teach dance. The TDFU model provides a unique structure for students to quickly build up their dance vocabulary and skills, and it also provides teachers with a framework to be competent instructors. The TDFU model has successfully transformed the dance methodology class in a physical education teacher education program in Michigan, with preservice teachers leaving class with an increased drive to teach dance units, and with an increased awareness of how to

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