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To cite this article: Bailey Anderson (2015) Using a Principle-Based Method to Support a Disability Aesthetic, *Journal of Dance Education*, 15:3, 87-90, DOI: [10.1080/15290824.2015.1056302](https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2015.1056302)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2015.1056302>



Published online: 14 Sep 2015.



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Using a Principle-Based Method to Support a Disability Aesthetic

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ABSTRACT This article calls choreographers and educators alike to continue building an awareness of methodologies that support a disability aesthetic. A disability aesthetic supports the embodiment of dancers with disabilities by allowing for their bodies to set guidelines of beauty and value. Principle-based work is a methodology that supports a disability aesthetic by focusing on qualities, aesthetic ideas, and concepts either for a creative practice or a technique practice. Principle-based work is an umbrella term that includes many practices and teaching methodologies. The dance community might hone skills in principle-based work as an additional option to a “form-based” technique, thereby allowing for a more inclusive dance space and pedagogy. This article offers both pragmatic and theoretical considerations for working with students with disabilities as a way to change how disability is represented and presented in dance culture.

It is time that society moves past the novelty of seeing disability on stage. Unfortunately, dance culture’s representation of dancers with disabilities often continues adverse stereotypes of disability. For instance, as outlined in the panel discussion “Written on the Body: A Conversation about Disability,” adverse stereotypes might include an inspirational narrative, outcast narrative, or romantic narrative as limiting representations of disability (Correal 2006). Choreography as well as pedagogical practices can continue stereotypes and uphold ableist ideas of the body and intelligence. We need to question the representations of those with disabilities and the pedagogy underlying choreography and dance education. As a product of culture, dance emerges from specific cultures and might reflect those cultures. Choreographers are also teachers of aesthetics, capturers of values, and conveyors of theory through cultural production. Rather than reflect back cultural understandings of disability, choreographers can reform and create new ideas about disability, which might then be infused back into culture, thereby shifting values. Dance educators also share the responsibility of creating and maintaining culture and directly influencing choreography through technique practice. Because of the power of these roles, how people with disabilities are represented becomes an important consideration for choreographers and educators alike. This article proposes applying principle-based methodology to technique classes and choreography as a way to allow for a disability aesthetic to be fully realized in the dance field. I offer both theoretical and pragmatic ideas on how to allow a new aesthetic to emerge from anybody in the

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classroom, thereby supporting a new paradigm in dance, one including disability. First, the reason for use of the term *disability* within this article is discussed. Second, the focus shifts to define a principle-based approach, its relationship with traditional models of teaching dance, and what it can offer to an educator and choreographer. Third, applications to teaching dance technique are explored with the hope that we will find new ways to create a more inclusive dance space within an educational setting. Finally, an examination of the application of principle-based methodology to choreography will be offered and how it supports those with disabilities in performance.

The term *disability* within this context is intentionally used to exercise a potential site of change that exists within disability. Disability in relation to dance and throughout this article refers to physical, intellectual, and emotional aspects of one's relationship to the world either visible or invisible. Dance culture situates itself in a precarious ablist space where the temporary disability of injury and bodily degeneration are a daily reality in hyper-able bodies. By hyper-able, I am referring to an extreme emphasis on ability through both a performance of ability and through training practice. In this culture of hyper-able bodies that are in natural entropy, there is a contradiction where disability might be found. Disability contains a potential to create innovative aesthetical understandings of the body, society, and beauty. Here *aesthetic* is referred to as, "not only judgments or evaluations, but properties, attitudes, experience and pleasure or value as well, and its application is no longer restricted to beauty alone" (Goldman 2010, 255). Based on this definition, aesthetics reveal a larger cultural creation, which includes the ideas of attitudes and pleasure. A disability aesthetic, coined by Tobin Siebers (2006), can be seen as a new way to view and argue for beauty in addition to shifting values. In addition to the term *aesthetic*, the contested term *disability* is used throughout this article. Ultimately one should be allowed to self-identify the terminology he or she identifies with, but this does not offer a universal solution. Disability as a term has been socially over taken by politically correct terms such as *differently abled*. Although ideally these labels might be redefined or eliminated, currently they are used without suitable alternatives. Therefore reclaiming the term disability and reinscribing it with meaning is a way to work within the already established structure. The choice to use this word is based around its power and the potential to reclaim its meaning within society. Petra Kuppers (2004), a disability and multicultural studies scholar described, "The history of the representation of disability and illness can be seen to be structured by attempts to contain the Other, to isolate it, present it as outside 'normal' society and bodies, and thus to exorcise its threatening, disruptive potential." Within this "disruptive potential," the dancing disabled body has power and agency to affect change on perception and a fundamental understanding of the variability of the body. When audiences are confronted with a dancer who has a disability, the way they see the dance shifts. The attempt to "contain the Other" in dance can be seen as an

attempt to hide the disability (with costume or movement) or make it classically beautiful. Yet, even in these situations, disability causes a disruption in seeing and asks the audience to question their aesthetic assumptions. Other terms used to describe disability include *differently abled* and *physically challenged*. Although these might appear as solutions, they continue to solidify the myth of the disabled-abled binary (rather than a spectrum). Dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright (1997) argued that they also "pass over important signifiers of difference. By being so general, they strip difference of all its disruptive power" (59). The ability of the dancer with a disability to create radical aesthetics and innovation can be hindered when his or her difference is ignored or covered over by imitation of an able body. Principle-based work allows for a new aesthetic of the disabled body to be fully realized within technique practice and choreography.

The term *principle-based* is specifically about movement qualities that underlie the essence of many major movements and styles in dance. Although principle-based work is not unfamiliar—teachers and those leading improvisation sessions often offer principles to work with during the course of a class—the approach and application of this work is a new perspective offered by this article. This new perspective is in the application of this work to create a more integrated classroom and the focus on teaching principles of specific styles. A blend between improvisation and finding specificity of movement styles, principle-based work allows dancers to find a rigorous relationship to style in their own bodies and experiences. This idea is in conversation and has similarities with Jane Hawley's work in Movement Fundamentals (MF) at Luther College and Patricia Reedy's work in universal design at Luna Dance Institute. These two methods of teaching also fall within the idea of principle-based work in their own unique methods. Reedy wrote (2013), "Representation is part of a recognition network allowing diverse learners options for acquiring information and knowledge; Expression provides options for diverse learners to demonstrate what they know; and Engagement taps into learners' interests, offers challenges and increases motivation." Representation, Expression and Engagement are the elements that Reedy identified as part of a universal design for dance, but that also would fall within the umbrella of a principle-based approach by allowing ideas and concepts to fuel the movement. Hawley, a professor at Luther College, has designed the MF curriculum, which incorporates tenets, phases, and concepts to allow for all bodies to create work together. Hawley (2001) said,

This curriculum takes a step further outside of the traditional and current dance-training box of imitation, repetition and supplementation. Instead of continued training in codified dance styles, the MF curriculum proposes to develop dance artists who understand *how to move* while cultivating movement vocabulary and intention. This curriculum proposes agency for the dancer, challenging the evolution and expansion of ideals and ideologies held in traditional dance forms.

Both of these methods focus on the idea of principles to encourage the learner to find meaning and movement potential for oneself. Reedy and Hawley, like many other educators and choreographers, are working with a methodological practice, which can be seen to support the idea of principle-based teaching. We now turn from Hawley's and Reedy's specific curricula to how one might teach a movement with a focus on the principles rather than form. For example, everybody cannot jump; however, the principles of a jump such as lightness, rebound, float, and the direction of up or out can be found in most bodies through practice and training. Another such example is classical ballet, which might consist of the qualities of length, dynamic range, and direct precise movement, all of which can be done in numerous ways and in all bodies. Principle-based teaching can also be applied to other forms such as West African dance, hip-hop, and jazz by teaching to the values and specificity of the form and individual steps. Another example would be teaching West African from a focus on principles such as flexion in the lower body, relationship to music, and radiating energy from multiple centers. Detailed and eloquent language expressing the inner landscapes of feelings allows students to understand the principle and find it within their own corporal experience. By teaching and choreographing in principles, all bodies can participate within their own range. In addition, teaching in this method has the potential to further a deeper understanding for all dance students regardless of their ability or level of dance experience. These principles might be different for teachers depending on their training and understanding of the movement style and quality. Just as an educator can teach a jump through many methods, so, too, can an educator break down the aspects of a movement into smaller ideas and feelings in the body and teach those principle-based concepts as technique.

This pedagogy sits in contrast to a form-based approach to either choreography or technique class. Susan Foster (1997), in her article "Dancing Bodies," discussed three bodies of dance training as perceived, ideal, and demonstrative. All three connect in specific ways to the dancer with a disability, yet here specifically the emphasis is a demonstrative body. Foster (1997) noted that, "the demonstrative body, mediates the acquisition of these skills by exemplifying correct or incorrect movement" (238). It is this demonstrative body that produces shapes either correctly or incorrectly. Here often a dancer with a disability has an imprecise and unique version of the skill that might be seen to operate incorrectly. For example, a dance student with a visual difference in the structure of his or her arm might read as imprecise and inaccurate in the copying of a port de bras in a ballet class. The idea of principle-based methodology might allow for new ways of finding movement while still maintaining aspects of a specific style and aesthetic.

A principle-based choreographic methodology would offer an embodying of equality and help to collapse the able-disabled hierarchy within dance culture. A traditional model of teaching has the teacher demonstrate and the student imitate the teacher. The idea behind this model

is that by copying how the teacher creates movement, students can start to learn how to move their own bodies in relationship to movement. In "Bloom's Taxonomy: Psychomotor Domain," the importance of mimicry is highlighted as an "early stage in learning" that then advances to "manipulation," "precision," "articulation," and finally "naturalization" (Dave 1970). These latter forms take more refined and varied incorporation within the dancer's physical and neurological learning process, therefore showing that moving beyond mimicry to creation and innovation is a vital part of dancing. In mixed ability or inclusive dance settings, incorporating dancers with disabilities with able bodies is a site that easily becomes problematic. Often the bodies of those with a disability are asked to mimic an able body in shape or form. Even if the teacher had a disability, disability is too varied for that mode of learning to be entirely adequate. Picture a person in a wheelchair doing an arm gesture shadowing the able body next to him or her. Shape is not accessible to a variety of bodies (from size, height, ability), and it creates a circuit of dancers with disabilities mimicking traditional dance shapes, which are imbedded in a history of oppression. Often form-based dance approaches were and still are based on specific bodily aesthetics, which are related to social oppressions such as ableism, sizeism, racism, sexism, and classism. The practices and history of a dance form are embedded within the technique form itself despite the educator's efforts. This is not to say that all mimicry or form-based techniques are repressive, but rather to argue for a larger variety of approaches based on contemporary and innovative pedagogies. Access to all these forms is vitally important in that one can discover and enjoy the complexities of mimicry with equal access to creation and innovation.

Within choreography, principle-based movement is equally vital. Here mimicry as the primary mode of dancing for those with disabilities becomes especially poignant. If choreographers are acting as leaders, then how they portray dancers with disabilities is important. How often does a dancer with a disability create movement for choreography? Is there a hidden assumption about intellectual capacity and the ability to create nuanced choreography within dance? Tobin Siebers (2006), the originator of disability aesthetics, answered this question, saying, "We still assume that creativity is an expression of inspiration and autonomy, just as we assume that aesthetic technique is a form of brilliance always at the artists' disposals" (71). If we trust that creativity is not only for those with intellectual and physical abilities, then allowing dancers with a disability to choreograph in their own bodies should become common practice. Using a different approach, principle-based choreography, the dancer with a disability creates the movement from his or her own interpretation, understanding, and embodiment. This method shifts the hierarchy of ableism within dance, allowing those with disabilities to be leaders by shaping the able bodies into their form; thereby culture can redefine its embedded assumptions about ability in dance. This is not to say that all choreographic approaches should shift,

but rather that another form might be offered. A pragmatic example of this work would be having choreographers and teachers select either aesthetic or thematic principles that they are trying to convey, and then ask the dancers to find those within their own bodies. This improvisational structure, designed by the choreographer or teacher, allows for the dancer's personal creative expression rather than reproducing the choreographer's movements. This is in sharp contrast to a choreographer delivering the movements to the dancers. Dancers and students with disabilities should be encouraged to create and innovate their own movements and choreographies, thereby potentially creating a new aesthetic and advancing choreography through a multiplicity of choices.

In conclusion, choreographers and teachers both share the role of shaping how society sees and values the body. Because of this, they are equally responsible to produce representations of marginalized populations, including dancers with disabilities, with care. The term *disability* contains disruptive potential, and likewise, when any and all bodies are able to fully express their unique movement potential, normative aesthetics can be questioned. Excessive use of imitation and form-based approaches to technique in teaching and choreography creates and reinforces able-disabled binaries. There is a potential to imply cognitive creative bias when dancers with disabilities are not trusted to choreograph or when their work is minimized by able-bodied dancers. By flipping the use of imitation and through having able-bodied dancers following the dancer with a disability, a new paradigm of movement and aesthetics is created. Moreover, principle-based choreography and teaching can

create accessibility in many technique forms for a vast array of individuals, thereby creating a new culture of acceptance in dance education. This article is a charge for choreographers and educators to create dances and lessons, that assert dancers of all abilities as innovators and creators of aesthetics in their own right and body.

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