

CLASS DOCUMENTATION

Teaching Practice

Master Dance Teacher

Specialization: Professional Education

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1. INTRODUCTION

This portfolio is part of the Module 3 in the Master Dance Teacher program (MADT) of the Palucca University of Dance Dresden. The goal is to offer the student the opportunity to document a project in which he or she participated, whether as a choreographer, assistant, dancer, or teacher.

I have chosen to document the process of preparing and conducting my teaching practice exam, which is also part of Module 3 of the MADT program and was given on April 12, 2022, at the Palucca University.

The central subject of my teaching practice exam is Somatics¹. This choice was made because of my interest in bringing somatic practices into dance education in order to investigate their impact and efficacy in dance class.

This portfolio comprises two main parts. In the first part I speak about my initial process of formulating ideas, writing the concept, and creating the movement material. Then I relate about the scenario in which the exam took place, meaning the dance space, the participants, the musician, the members of the examining board and my emotional state before the beginning of the examination. In the second part I will discuss the progression of the class, focusing on aspects such as what it was like to teach a class with live music as I usually work with recorded music, the tools I used in the studio to communicate the theoretical content, and my methods of transmitting the movement material. The conclusion of this paper includes reflections about the effectiveness of my methods and my manner of transmission, concepts that I could have more effectively elaborated in the class process, and my experience of the students' learning process.

As reference for this portfolio I used my own written concept entitled *Finding Fascia: A Dance Class with a Focus on Experiencing Fascia*, which was submitted to the examining commission on January 27, 2022, as well as the video record of the teaching practice, filmed by the technical team of the Palucca University.

Finally, the images attached in the appendix were extracted from the above-mentioned video recording of the teaching practice exam, as well as from the website of the Palucca University.

¹ Somatics is a field within bodywork and movement studies which emphasizes internal physical perception and experience.

2. WRITING THE CONCEPT

I wrote my concept for the teaching practice exam between December 2021 and January 2022. My exam was scheduled to be held on February 4, 2022. However, because of a suspected infection with the coronavirus, my exam was cancelled by the university administration.

The process of coming up with a theme and designing a class format happened quickly. Initially I was certain of one thing: I wanted to have Somatics as the central theme of my class. I wanted to make it an opportunity for myself to deal with Somatics and seek ways to tackle the points of intersection of Somatic Practice and Dance.

In a second moment there was a brainstorming of ideas about which somatic tools I could integrate into the class. I first thought of using *Touch*² and *Developmental Movement Patterns*³. These ideas quickly led me to a final decision. I noticed I had a great interest in learning more about Fascia, so I made it the central theme of my research. Fascia seemed to me to be an ideal theme because it offers the opportunity to work with *Touch* through exploring one's own body as well as someone else's body, and it provides great ideas for movement exploration.

Along with this decision came the idea of working with an object that could quickly bring students a bodily sensation of Fascia's movement qualities. I came across a video⁴ by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, where she explores moving from the Fascia with the aid of a TheraBand. At that moment I found the supporting tool I was looking for.

Then, when I already had Fascia and TheraBand as tools, I considered having some *jumps* within the class structure. I wanted it to be tackled from a somatic point of view. I did not want to talk about specific dance techniques. Instead, I wanted to talk about relationships between bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and connective tissues. Then I had the idea of using the Tensegrity Model⁵ and talk about *bounciness*⁶, which seemed to me to be a great way to talk about

² gentle touch (in German "achtsame Berührung")

³ Bartenieff Fundamentals and Body-Mind Centering

⁴ Exploring Fascia through the Fluids and Bands with Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrPZ7t-N7-M

⁵ I will clarify the concept of Tensegrity in the next section.

⁶ The word "bounciness" refers to the elasticity of the fascial tissue and its ability to recoil or bounce back to normal when brought out of rest. My intention was to integrate the Fascia experience to the Tensegrity Model.

jumping. I did some research on the internet about this subject and found a video demonstration⁷ where the bouncy quality of Tensegrity structures is portrayed.

To sum up, during the process of gathering ideas, I outlined my concept using 4 main pillars: Fascia, Tensegrity, Touch and TheraBand.

3. CONTENT

In my teaching practice examination, I focused on Fascia. This is a network of connective tissue found everywhere in the human body. Looking from the biomechanical viewpoint, Fascia stores the kinetic energy produced in the muscles and distributes it throughout the muscle chains in a very efficient way (Kussmaul, 2017).

Because of this ability of Fascia, I was interested in applying this knowledge in a dance class to investigate differences in movement quality between muscle use and the conscious application of the experience of Fascia. The aim of my class was to give students the opportunity to experience Fascia in the various movements we tackled throughout the class, addressing the close relationship⁸ between muscle function and fascial tissue.

My strategies for this facilitation included-moments within the class where the students could play with their imagination and intuition. I invited them to let their senses lead them on exploratory activities, for example through working with touch in pairs and through guided improvisation sessions using TheraBand⁹, which supported the students in becoming aware of the regulation of muscle tonus (light to strong weight) while moving.

Despite of the fact that while moving one cannot separate muscle from Fascia, there is an essential difference in movement qualities when moving from the muscles and from the Fascia. Generally speaking, to have a muscle experience can make me feel powerful and strong while moving; on the other hand, to have a fascia experience can make my dancing more effortless, gracious and fluid.

⁷ Tensegrity Demostration: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-Ny3BfhVdw

⁸ They work together.

⁹ TheraBand is an elastic exercise band made of latex or latex-free material. By using the resistance that TheraBands provide, muscles can be strengthened easily. It is also used on the process of recovery from injuries or problems with functional mobility (Verywell Health, 2022).

Another tool I brought into the studio was the Tensegrity Model¹⁰. It is a prototype of a tensional network that explains how force transmission is possible to happen within an independent system. This model is commonly used to explain how fascial tissue functions in the human body.

A Tensegrity structure can be created by using sticks of wood and rubber bands or wire. In the human body, its correspondent is respectively the bones as the elements that produce compression and the muscles and fascia as the elements that assures the presence of tension.

In dance vocabulary, these forces could be translated into *pushing* and *pulling*, in which pushing is the act of creating space through compression and pulling is the counterpointing force that assures that the dancer won't entirely fall off-balance.

Beyond Fascia and Tensegrity, I used other tools as supportive material. For example, the awareness of shoulder blades, elbows and hands in the *Homologous* and *Navel Radiation*Patterns; sensing the 3-dimensional action of the breath; head-tail connectivity that encourages the mobility of the spine; working with movement *Initiations* from distal-limbs, mid-limb joints and proximal joints. All these tools are found in the Bartenieff Fundamentals (a part of the Laban System) and in all somatic practices as Body-Mind Centering (BMC) and The Feldenkrais Method.

4. PREPARATION

4.1 Structuring the Class

I created a total of 17 activities to be performed over the 3 days of classes. They are distributed into categories and objectives as follows:

| Warm-up | 2 | To shift the attention to somatic work including |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Set Phrases | 5 | Provide movement material to work with |
| Crossing the Floor | 1 | Provides movement material to work with |
| Explanatory Activity | 2 | Theoretical presentation on Fascia and Tensegrity |
| Exploratory Activity | 4 | To put theory into practice through improvisation |
| Cooling-Down | 3 | To bring the attention back to breathing |

¹⁰ The word Tensegrity was made up by the engineer Buckminster Fuller, combining *tension* and *integrity*, and it was based on a structure of floating compression made by the artist Kenneth Snelson (Kussmaul, 2017).

4.2 Developing Material

The process of creating movement material arose from my interest in bringing aspects of Somatics to Dance. With this goal I gave a focus to physiological aspects of human movement. Instead of pursuing movement material aimed at "polishing" figures and movements conceptualized within the dance language (tendu, pirouette attitude, curve, etc.), I prioritized the *Patterns of Total Body Connectivity*¹¹ (*PTBCs*), as they are seen in various Somatic Practices such as Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis and Body Mind-Centering.

Two Warm-ups

The first warm-up¹² is called "Homologous Push". The intention is to bring the body from horizontal to vertical, going through the following stages: Breath, Navel-Radiation, Homologous Push and Upper-Lower. I intended to focus on several areas of the body in a gradual manner, first giving attention to body weight and the action of *Yielding* and *Pushing* lying on the stomach, then I intended to gradually integrate body parts as movement initiators in the following order: pelvis, the connection hands-elbows-shoulder blades, head, tail and feet.

The second warm-up, entitled "Starfish" is an evolution of the first. The first part of it takes place on the floor in the Starfish position. It starts by bringing attention to the connectivity of the 6 limbs (head, tail, arms, legs) with the body's gravitational center (navel or Solar Plexus), which is followed by a sequence of *homolateral movement patterns*, where *lateral flexions* and *rolling onto fetal position* are introduced; then over the knees, through the table position and on to standing position. The transition to standing is identical to the first warm-up.

¹¹ "The PTBCs are based on the neurological movement progression, often called motor development, or the basic neurological patterns that the infant goes through in the first approximately 14 months of life. These patterns develop functional capabilities, which creates the opportunity for increased psychological expression and organizes the developing brain. Revising the PTBCs as an adult can be useful to enhance movement skills. Further, they offer the student of movement a framework for how movement is organized in the body. There are 6 PTBCs: Breath, Core-Distal, Head-Tail, Upper-Lower, Body-Half and Cross-Lateral" (Wahl, 2019, p.34).

¹² See images on Appendix 1, extracted from the video record of my exam.

Five Movement Phrases

The first movement phrase¹³ entitled *Head-Tail* aims to work on the connectivity of the head with the body's gravitational center. Through slow and direct movements of approximation and distancing, to the front and to the sides, standing up and on the floor, 5 of the 6 *Patterns of Total Body Connectivity* were addressed: Breath, Core-Distal, Head-Tail, Upper-Lower and Body-Half.

The second movement phrase entitled *Circles* also emerged with the goal of working with PTBCs. However, in a more dynamic way, and using a larger spatial volume compared to the first phrase. In addition, I focused here on *Initiations* with the head and tail, on joint mobility along the entire length of the spine, on rotations of the spinal cord, and its connectivity with the lower limbs through the pelvis.

The third movement phrase¹⁴ entitled *Rolling Down* emerged as an intersection between the first moment of the class, which had primarily a focus on the connectivity of the upper and lower limbs to the body's gravitational center (navel or to the solar plexus), and the second moment, where I intended to start addressing the theme of the class, Fascia and its qualities of movement. This phrase had flexions, extensions, and rotations of the trunk; transitions between the sagittal, horizontal and vertical planes; movements of the upper limbs, which should be kept at all times connected and opposed to the center of the body¹⁵. Such opposition was intended to create elastic tension and integrity in the body, which are principles of Tensegrity as well as the work with Fascia exploration.

The fourth movement phrase¹⁶ entitled *Sliding* came out of my wish to integrate Floorwork into the class structure. I wanted to bring basic movement principles like *pushing* and *pulling*, *sliding*, and *rolling*, always preceded by a *yielding* action, as seen in BMC and all somatic practices. During the execution of the phrase, the idea was to maintain at all times two opposite directions, causing tension between these 2 poles, which at the same time should remain dynamic and elastic. Here I wanted to apply ideas from Tensegrity.

The fifth movement phrase is called *Drawing Circles*. I intended to integrate it on the third day of class, when the concepts of Fascia and Tensegrity would have already been introduced. The

¹³ See images on Appendix 2, extracted from the video record of my exam.

¹⁴ See images on Appendix 3, extracted from the video record of my exam.

¹⁵ See images 6 and 7 on the Appendix 9.

¹⁶ See images on Appendix 4, extracted from the video record of my exam.

phrase contains jumping, horizontal displacement and a fall. It appeared as a way to condense into one movement phrase all the principles that would have been worked on during the first 2 classes. However, there was no time to execute it on the day of the exam.

Crossing the Floor

The phrase, entitled *Crawling Tiger*, was also not performed in the class. As the name implies, it was a forward and backward displacement on the floor, using a Cross-Lateral movement pattern, with a moment of balance on one leg and its opposite arm.

Three Cooling-Downs¹⁷

The first one I called *Breath Dimensions*. It was divided into 2 parts: the first part was in standing position, using individual *Touch* on the back and the sides of the ribcage. The invitation was to feel the breath in its 3 dimensions (vertical, horizontal and sagittal), feeling the *swelling* and *shrinking* of the thorax and abdominal cavity; in the second part I would invite the students to bend over their knees and feel the movement of the breath on their backs.

The second warm-up is called *Breathing Diaphragm*. The idea is to invite the students to pay attention to the relationship between diaphragm, pelvic floor and belly. Standing upright, with each inhalation, the diaphragm contracts ("flattens") in caudal direction, massaging the organs of the abdominal cavity. As a reaction, the pelvic floor also extends towards the tail and the belly expands to the front. The movement in the exhalation is exactly the opposite.

The third is called *Being Breathed*. The idea is to invite students to awaken their awareness to be effortlessly breathing, to focus on a quality of breathing that comes from their own cells, as opposed to intentionally taking air in and out of the lungs. Guiding phrases would be: "Let yourself be breathed. Don't make the breath happen! Let your breath breathe! Your cells know what to do".

¹⁷ These were not performed in class because of lack of time.

5. CLASS SETTING

5.1 Studio

My class took place at the campus of the Palucca University in studio number 6. The studio is equipped with a dance floor, bars fixed to the walls and movable bars, mirrors, windows connected to an automatic ventilation system, sound system with blue tooth signal, piano, internet connection, heating system, overhead lighting distributed on the sides and center of the room, wall clock, chairs, flipchart, speakers hanging from the ceiling, television and emergency exit.

5.2 Dancers

I worked with students from the second year of the Bachelor of Arts Dance program of the Palucca University in Dresden. The group comprises a total of 14 students between the ages of 17 and 20 years. Six of them participated in my teaching practice exam: Thom (Australia), Billie (New Zealand), Jack (England), Alden (Australia), Stella (New Zealand), and Phiebe (Australia).

The students have different levels of dance experience, especially in the field of contemporary dance. However, they are all proficient in classical dance. As for their experience in Somatic Practice, two of them have had some instruction in The Feldenkrais Method and all of them attend Pilates classes.

5.3 Musician

Sebastian Rehnert¹⁸ is a musician from Germany who trained at the *Berufsfachschule für Musik Oberfranken* in Kronach and at the *Hochschule von Musik Carl Maria von Weben Dresden*. He played for my classes using a sound recording device called "Loop Station", which was connected to the piano and to a keyboard with sound synthesizer.

5.4 Examination Board

On the examining commission there were two professors for Contemporary Dance from the Palucca University: Prof. Dr. Jenny Coogan¹⁹ from the USA and Prof. Rita Aozane-Bilibio²⁰ from Brazil.

¹⁸ See portrait in the appendix 5

¹⁹ See portrait in the appendix 5

²⁰ See portrait in the appendix 5

6. MY EMOTIONAL STATE PRIOR TO CLASS BEGIN

The Teaching Practice Examination took place on the last day of a block of 3 classes, in each of which I had the opportunity to work with the same²¹ group of students. Under this circumstance, on the third day of classes I felt confident and secure for the performance of my teaching practice exam.

However, prior to class begin I felt the need to isolate myself, to find a place where I could have little external information coming to me, where I could save body-mind energy and concentrate on the activities I was going to propose to the students. My main concern at this point was to find a language that could clearly express my ideas about Fascia exploration. I then sat down with a notebook²² and wrote down words that I intended to use in class. For example, *stability*, *elasticity*, *linearity*, *directionality*, *continuity* and *bounciness*.

I also wrote down some questions that I wanted to ask the students with the intention of bringing them closer to an understanding of Fascia. I searched for questions that could condense the class content and the proposed exercises into a single meaningful whole. For example: Can you feel the difference in moving from the muscles and from the fascia? How does it feel like if you try to address fascia into your movement research? Does it change the quality of your movement if you bring the attention to your breath?

This strategy calmed the anxiety I felt before entering the studio. I understand such anxiety as insecurity about my ability to clearly express my ideas and intentions through spoken language. On the other hand, regarding the mastery of the theoretical content that I intended to pass on to the students, although I am not an expert on fascial tissue and its relations with dance, I was satisfied at that moment with the "internal images" about this topic that I already carried with me, which gave me the security I needed to stand in front of the students and introduce this topic, confident about being there.

²¹ Although not all students were present on all 3 days.

²² See images on Appendix 6

7. THE CLASS

7.1 Teaching with Live Music

For me teaching with live music was a new experience, which I enjoyed very much. The day before my first class with the group of BAT 2 students, the musician and I met to talk about the class exercises and improvisation sessions, as well as the ways in which I could communicate with him. I had never taught with live music before, which made it a great learning opportunity for me.

One difficulty I realize I had is to communicate to the musician the tempo (musical speed) of the dance phrases. Since I usually teach with recorded music, I am not used to having to speak or sing my desired tempo. Before I start a class, I select a playlist and when I demonstrate an exercise to the students, I do it with the respective music, and because it is playing, I simply follow the rhythm it demands.

Sebastian gave me the following feedback after the first class: I had not kept the same musical tempo when I demonstrated a given exercise. He then asked me to be more clear about the tempo of the movement phrases and not change it in the middle of a (my) demonstration.

On the day of the exam I still didn't feel completely confident in this respect, but my communication with Sebastian was good, especially in the moments of improvisation. For me, he understood the "spirit" of the class and offered music and sounds that helped to build the atmosphere that I had envisioned in my class concept.

7.2 Transmitting Class Content: Explanatory Activities

7.2.1 Fascia

I introduced Fascia giving some information regarding its physiology in the human body. This was followed by the presentation of several images on my laptop depicting Fascia, each of which had a specific purpose. For example: to show the linearity of fascial tissue; its connectivity to muscle tissue and its various groups; places where fascial tissue is found - in and around body structures; the structure of "trained" and "untrained" Fascia.

The students showed interest in the subject, they asked questions and I answered them from my own perspective and knowledge of the subject, also trying to bring the subject closer to daily experiences²³.

7.2.2 Tensegrity Model

Through images and a video demonstration²⁴ I introduced Tensegrity in such a way that could be quickly applied to the dancer's body. I consciously refrained from presenting the history of how or by whom this model of force transmission was created. Instead, I focused on the idea of a structure composed of "islands of compression in an ocean of tension" (Kussmaul, 2017), which I translated in dance terms as *pushing* and *pulling* qualities.

7.3 Exploratory Activities

7.3.1 Working with TheraBand²⁵

As a tool to somatically experience the fascial tissue, each student received a TheraBand²⁶ of approximately 1.2 meters. On the day of my examination, some students worked with the green one and others with the red one.

Technically, pulling on an elastic band at the same time in opposite directions creates a tension in the band that can be compared to the tension exerted by fascial tissue in body structures such as bones and muscles. As the dancer stretches the band in opposite directions, a force (compression) is created in his body that constantly acts against the tension present in the band. This relation of forces can be understood as the idea of a Tensegrity system.

My intension was to facilitate an understanding and the perception of this dynamic of forces.

Among the various stages of exploration with the band I brought in words and some questions that could support the students in their research. E.g. I told them to look for linearity of motion. I suggested that they go to the ground and come back upright seeking not to collapse, but rather looking for a bouncy quality that would allow them to return to their feet in a continuous

²³ E.g. stretching the body in the morning after waking up.

²⁴ Tensegrity Demonstration: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-Ny3BfhVdw

²⁵ See images on Appendix 7, extracted from the video record of my exam.

²⁶ Different TheraBands have different amounts of resistance. The green band, for example, offers about 1/4 more resistance compared to the red band.

manner. We then started experimenting with off-balances on one leg and then used the band as a support for jumping.

As a finale to this movement research, I invited them to individually investigate the same movement quality, but without the use of the TheraBand.

7.3.2 Working with Partner

Using Counterbalance²⁷

After the exploration using the TheraBand individually, we moved on to an exploration of the same quality of movement, focusing on linearity and continuity, this time with a partner. The idea was that the partner could provide the dancer with a support similar to that of the band. The partner, in this way, could not be passive, but reacts to all the movements initiated and carried along by the dancer, in the same way as naturally occurs with the dynamics of force transmission present in the TheraBand (when it is stretched).

Using Touch: Finding Fascia

I invited the students to search and try to perceive the fascial tissue through their haptic perception²⁸ and manipulation of their partner's body. This moment was divided into 3 phases. In the first phase the task was, through soft touch, to place the hand on the soft spots of the partner's body and to search for the layer of tissue just under the skin and above the musculature. In the second phase I invited the students to move parts of their partner's body out of shape and then let go of it (here the "bounciness" of Fascia is quite evident). In the third phase, which was performed individually, I asked them to imagine an air cushion under one of their arms, to lift the arm using as little muscular effort as possible, then to gently extend their fingers, reaching out towards the space. I then asked them if they could feel the stretching of the fascial tissue from their fingertips, running inward towards the front of their chest. Lukas, one of the students who attended the first day of class, said he felt the connection of the movement of his fingers with his chest.

²⁷ See images on Appendix 8, extracted from the video record of my exam.

²⁸ Haptic perception means literally the ability "to grasp something". Perception in this case is achieved through the active exploration of surfaces and objects by a moving subject, as opposed to passive contact by a static subject during *tactile perception*.

7.3.3 Working with Initiations

After the search for fascial tissues in the partner's body, I invited the students to explore the elastic quality of Fascia individually through improvisation. I provided initially some words that served as a guide during the movement research: elasticity, continuity, resistance, lightness, fluidity. The improvisation was held in 4 phases. First: standing, I invited them to feel the vertical line running along their body, the head-tail alignment through the spine. Second: I invited them to make gestures starting with the distal limbs (head, hands, tail, feet) and let them sequence through the body. Then I invited them to add an opposition to a movement that had been initiated, creating 2 spatial pulls (the pushing and pulling qualities I mentioned about Tensegrity). Third: Initiations through the mid-limbs (knees and elbows). Fourth: Initiations through the proximal limbs (hip joints and shoulder joints). Then I invited them to mix all these Initiations maintaining the fluidity and a constant opposition of two body parts. Later, I added a third body part, which resulted in a greater three-dimensionality²⁹ in the improvisation.

8. REFLECTION

I am very happy for the opportunity I had to work and exchange with the students from the BAT 2 group of the Palucca University. I felt that the students were involved with the subject I proposed in my classes. I felt so through their energy in class, and also through the interest that many of them showed in asking questions about Fascia and Tensegrity.

In relation to my role as a teacher, I am pleased with the classes I gave and the results I attained, given the circumstances and the framework in which the classes took place, with limited time to work with the students and the fact that the approached theme is relatively new to me.

One point that was raised in the interview with the examining board right after the exam was the way I communicated or failed to communicate the time (music counts) of the exercises. Watching the footage of the exam I realized that the way I delt with *tempo* was not only insufficient in communicating with the musician, but especially with the students. The musician knew how to fill in the gaps in my communication with him, and did an amazing job. The students, on the other hand, sometimes did not understand what was to be done musically.

²⁹ For example, starting pulling with the head, then opposing this action with a pulling with the tail, then adding a pulling with one elbow, making a triangle with the first two body parts.

This brings up a very important topic: Choosing words that can most clearly communicate the teacher's choices and intentions to the students. It is not enough for a teacher to know exactly what he wants to teach in class. It is important to know how to translate into words what one wants to teach. However, it seems to me that there is here another aspect. Different people understand words in different ways. For me, how a person reads (understands) a sign depends greatly on the way these signs (words) are spoken. But beyond the intention with which they are said, a word spoken by a speaker can be understood in different ways by its receiver because different signs can carry different meanings for each individual. Based on this premise, it seems to me that the teacher's function is, as far as communication is concerned, always a work-in-process, and is always an approximation of what is intended to be taught, since it is supposedly impossible to predict exactly how the transmitted information reaches the receiver and is understood by him.

I end my reflection by stating that the goal of my classes was achieved. The qualities of movement that we worked with throughout the classes were present in the students' bodies in our last movement exploration session³⁰. These are: elasticity, opposition, stability, fluidity, and continuity, to name a few. However, I believe this was due not only to my choice of words in the process of conveying information, but also to my movement demonstrations.

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³⁰ See images on Appendix 9, extracted from the video record of my exam.

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