

Avoiding Traps That Lead to Mindless Dancing

1. Keep an Open Mind

The first key to avoiding mindless dancing is to keep an open mind to new categories of movement and even to new definitions of dance or choreography. You need to take on a mental posture in which you are not trying to fit new information into old practices. Permitting yourself to fit into a new category as a dancer—a modern dancer, a choreographer, a risk taker—also opens the door to growth and development.

2. Reframe the Context

The second key to avoiding mindless dancing is to reframe the context of what you know. If you enter a library, for example, you will lower your voice without being instructed to do so, because you have learned from previous experience that this context, or environment, requires this. It is possible, though, that you have entered the group working space for the library, where talking and conversing are allowed, even encouraged.

Dance should be approached with consciousness, not presumption or habit. Changing your concept of the context is known as reframing. Effective dancers will be able to reframe movement they know to adapt to a new context.

3. Avoid Looking for Absolutes

The third key to avoiding mindlessness is to avoid looking for absolutes. It can be reassuring to know that you have executed a technical exercise “correctly,” but the correct way of performing a movement is entirely dependent on the context of the movement. The context includes a large number of variables. These variables could be things such as the extent of your flexibility compared to the flexibility of other dancers, or the proportions of your arms and legs, or whether you are recovering from an injury, or even whether or not the teacher is looking for uniformity among the dancers.

If you are looking for feedback from an instructor on the right and wrong way to dance with absolute certainty, then you are limiting the range of dance that you can perform. While an unconditional statement such as “that was correct” may be comforting to hear, it encourages a mindless repetition. If you repeat a movement because it was correct before, you may be ignoring that the context of the movement is now different.

Accomplished dancers embrace the ambiguity of no absolute rights and wrongs in dance and see this as the possibility to expand their abilities and experiences.

What these three keys have in common is that they are focused on the process of learning to dance, not on the specific outcomes. A mindful dancer is paying attention to the way in which she is dancing and the context of that experience, not on the ability to achieve specific shapes or tricks with the body. Focusing on external outcomes without paying attention to the way in which these results are achieved creates a preoccupation with success or failure rather than developing a natural desire to explore the world. A mindful disposition is inevitably a process orientation to the world, in which a variety of stimulating experiences lead to growth.