

The KEY to Brain-Compatible Dance Education

As reviewed by Colleen Olson

This summer I attended Theresa (Terry) Goetz's fascinating Summerterm workshop *The Power of the Brain Dance* at The Hartt School, University of Hartford. This five-day workshop was based on the philosophy of brain-compatible teaching and the power of the BrainDance, as developed by Anne Green Gilbert, the author of *Brain-Compatible Dance Education*.

What is BrainDance?

According to Anne Green Gilbert, BrainDance is an exercise based on the fundamental movement patterns that babies discover in their first year. These movement patterns wire the central nervous system by laying the foundation for appropriate behavior and attention, eye convergence necessary for reading, sensory-motor development and more. Because it is based on the primary developmental movement patterns, the brain is reorganized each time we move through these patterns. These exercises help students become focused, energized and ready to learn.

Why BrainDance?

Through Brain-Compatible Dance instruction, students:

Physical Benefits:

- Develop strong and healthy bodies through movement and exercise;
- Increase body awareness, control, balance and coordination;
- Release energy through positive physical activity;

Social Benefits:

- Learn to cooperate with others through partner and group work;
- Practice self-discipline through sharing space and interacting safely with other dancers;
- Discover the value of individual differences and appreciate diverse cultural expression;
- Learn a universal, nonverbal language that is inclusive of all cultures and abilities;

Emotional Benefits:

- Become more self-aware by expressing feelings through movement. Contrasting movements help define feelings which lead to appropriate behavior;
- Increase self-esteem through positive and noncompetitive experiences;
- Feel the joy and satisfaction of expressing his or her own thoughts through movement and voice;

Intellectual Benefits:

- Acquire a movement vocabulary, both verbal and physical, applicable to all areas of a child's life;
- Develop problem-solving skills through the experience of solving movement problems;
- Strengthen the ability to listen and follow directions;
- Increase learning in other curricular areas such as reading, math and science; and
- Develop neural pathways through movement patterning that are essential to language acquisition, reading readiness, and mathematical ability. Research has shown that perceptual/motor ability is related to the acquisition of more complex skills.

Why every classroom needs movement to learn:

- Movement increases the flow of oxygen and glucose to the brain to ready the student for learning;
- Movement releases chemicals that repair and maintain neural circuits in the hippocampus, our brain area for learning and memory, balance behavior and reduce emotional stress and put us into a quiet alert state;
- Movement hooks attention because children associate it with positive feelings; and
- Movement integrates brain function and help to organize fine and gross motor skills.

How?

During the workshop, we worked through daily sample lesson plans to help us use the techniques of *BrainDance* in our music classrooms. Each lesson explored one of various dance concepts – including place, flow, direction, tempo/speed, rhythm, pathway, weight, focus, relationship and energy – that required us to utilize problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Anne Green Gilbert’s suggested five-part lesson plan includes:

PART	ROLE	THINKING SKILLS
Warming up	Teacher-directed	KNOWLEDGE
Exploring the concept	Student-centered	COMPREHENSION
Developing skills	Teacher-directed	APPLICATION/ANALYSIS
Creating	Student-centered	SYNTHESIS
Cooling down	Teacher/Student	EVALUATION

Even if you are new to the philosophy of *BrainDance*, you will enjoy using this activity in your music classroom. The Puzzle Shape Museum activity develops spatial intelligence and leads students to discover many new shapes. This ability to find empty or negative space is an especially important concept for athletes and dancers.

Puzzle Shape Museum, from *Brain-Compatible Dance Education*:

Have students connect elbows with a partner by the count of five and then decide who will be a statue inside the museum and who will start outside the museum. This is a simple way to divide the group in half. Statues stay in place while their partners leave the museum area. When the music begins, students outside the museum enter, chose any statue by standing in front of it and form a shape fitting into the negative or empty space of the statue, just as a puzzle piece fits another. Puzzle shapes relate without touching. When the dancer forming the second puzzle piece is still, the original statue moves carefully to form another puzzle shape with a different statue. When the statue moves away, the student will be left with a new shape with lots of empty space. The new statue holds that shape until another dancer comes to fit into the shape like a puzzle piece. Suggested Music: *Music for Creative Dance, Volume IV, #3*

I recommend this thought-provoking, inspiring and just plain enjoyable course to all music educators! For more information on the *BrainDance* and additional resources, refer to www.creativedance.org. For more information on Summerterm workshops at Hartt, go to harttweb.hartford.edu/summer.php