



**WHY I  
DON'T  
MANAGE  
MY  
CLASSROOM**

by Nicole Perry

Over the past few years, I have been teaching professional development workshops for dance teachers on topics like touch, consent, and power dynamics. So, I belong to many Facebook groups of dance teachers. An issue that frequently surfaces in these groups is "punishment" in dance class. It bothers me, and I couldn't quite explain why until this past summer, when it became a big topic in a professional development course I was leading. I spent serious time examining my habits, looking at the methods of others, and thinking about the kind of dance studio environment I want the students and dancers I work with to experience. I realized that this idea of physical punishment did not fit with my ethics of consent-based, trauma-informed, or socially just teaching.

If you are interested in social justice, I invite you to join me on this examination.

1. "Classroom management." This phrase is problematic. It reinforces hierarchies and power dynamics. It sets up learning environments as production environments. What if I didn't "manage" my classroom, but instead, we had Community Agreements of what we all expect from each other to create a positive and safe learning environment? I structure my Community Agreements like a triangle with Honor in the center. Then each point is labeled: Ourselves, Each Other, Our Space (the image below is the slide I use in virtual Professional Development). Finally, we talk about what it looks like to honor each of those.

I've created Community Agreements with everyone from Middle Schoolers to professional teachers and dancers. I love that Community Agreements diffuse power dynamics and hierarchies—we all expect this behavior from each other. There are no rules I am exempt from. We created the expectations together.



2. Corporal punishment. If you are making your students run, do crunches, or do other physical tasks, you are engaging in corporal punishment. There are a variety of issues here.

a. We are in the business of helping dancers appreciate, care for, and understand their bodies. However, when we use the body as a mode of punishment, we are setting them against their bodies, which does not support consent-based or trauma-informed teaching.

b. Part of caring for our bodies as dancers should also be conditioning and fitness. When we use those methods as punishment, we diminish students' desire to engage in them for health and wellness. Instead, we should encourage students in physical pursuits that will support their dancing, not implementing them with a negative framework.

c. Physical punishments are most often implemented for "bad attitudes"—for example, showing up late—not lack of fitness. Therefore, running laps is only punitive, not corrective. It doesn't address the problem. Our job as teachers is to let our students know what not to do and teach them how to create change. Running laps will not make their attitude any better.

d. It is illegal in 31 states to punish minors in this way in public schools. These laws are most often used against spanking children but could apply to other forms of physical punishment. If it is illegal to use corporal punishment in schools, we shouldn't do it in other settings, either.

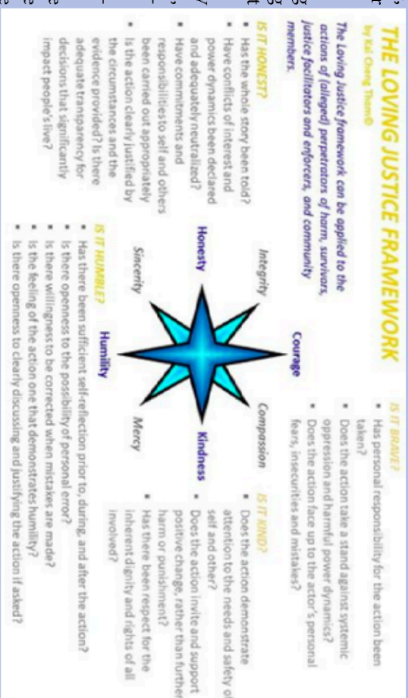
e. Let's think about transformative justice. This phrase is common in many social justice circles. But what does it mean, and what might it look like in the dance studio?

Transformative justice is justice that seeks to address harm or violence without causing more harm or violence. The goal of any accountability measure or consequence is change. Corporal punishment, while it may stop the action in the moment, does not actually encourage change. Instead, it may promote fear, which could cause change. But, that is not the kind of learning environment I want to create, nor is that change a positive or lasting one.

I love the work of Kai Cheng Thom, who calls it Loving Justice. She offers this great graphic on her Instagram.

If a consequence is necessary for a student to be socially just, consent-based, and trauma-informed, it needs to:

- Be supportive of self-reflection.
- ◊ Can the student see their need for change and how they can take personal responsibility for that change?
- ◊ This is why I like reflective assignments. As mentioned in my "Disrupting Oppressive Patterns of Power" article last spring, they could write or record a video or voice memo. The goal is reflection and change, not punitive action.
- ◊ The Community Agreements can also make great reflection prompts. How has their behavior violated one of those points? Why is that important for our learning environment? What changes can they make in the future?
- ◊ Depending on the behavior and class dynamics, this may become a public apology to the class.
- ◊ Making them do crunches for being late may help their core strength, which will help their dancing. But, it does not give them skills for not being late. Writing a five-step plan for timely arrival (I will leave my house by x time, I will not stop for



Starbucks, etc.) coupled with a paragraph explaining the importance of a good warm-up, might help. Or, give them the chance to design and lead a warm-up! Maintain a healthy teacher/student relationship that does not use power of position to ensure compliance but rather keeps us all focused on the learning to be done. Is it clear why the ask for a specific behavior supports their understanding of dance or is it:

◊ A "because I said so" moment steeped in power dynamics?

Many of us grew up in learning and dance institutions based on hierarchies, power of position, and the unquestioned role of leadership. However, these are not traits that foster creativity, collaboration, or joy. I've decided I'd rather have an occasionally rowdy room that needs to be invited to focus than one that obeys out of fear.

