



Beyond the stage: transferable skills for health and resilience

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Beyond the stage: transferable skills for health and resilience

Alice Marshall (Vale) 

Like many young girls, I took part in weekly ballet classes. That twirl of a tutu, that flash of princess-like grace was what initially attracted me to this art form. As time passed, I became dedicated, and this intrigue became a passion, and that passion led me to full-time training. I entered what I found to be a gruelling world where perfection is key, but as a working dance artist to this day I not only know the benefits of my vocational training to me as a performer, but also see the benefits of it in all areas of my life. The training of a dancer is not just having the ability to do a quad-pirouette (although a great party trick!) it is a process which trains skills that are then transferable to many aspects of both working and personal life.

My training is in ballet and contemporary, with other genres of dance being explored throughout. As a young artist I did not see the transferable skills I was gaining, I was focused on becoming a performer, and with hindsight, I was far too narrow-minded to listen to my tutors, who were advising how to use our training in a range of contexts. Being blinkered is a young adult's prerogative, and without such gumption many new discoveries and innovations would not be realised. But as I sit here with my worn-out hips and knees, I am now thankful that the skills I learnt have become part of my expertise and have provided me with a bedrock on which I have built a successful career, supporting my academic research, pedagogy, and well-being.

These reflections go beyond my personal experience. As someone who now trains others in dance, I see first-hand the incredible range of benefits students gain throughout their journey. In addition to cultivating a range of interpersonal skills, dance training – and really, dance in any form – can have a significant positive impact on our overall health and

well-being. Particular physical skills developed in dance training can support long-term health, and the connection built between mind and body allows dance training to support health holistically. In this essay, I discuss some of the specific ways that I have observed health benefits from my own dance training and the training of my students.

The benefit of dance on physical health

Those with a higher existing level of physical fitness and competency are more likely to continue engaging in physical activity, and report higher intrinsic and extrinsic motivation compared to those who are not regularly active (Geller et al. 2018). Dance naturally boosts coordination, flexibility, strength and stamina through dynamic movement, enhancing cardiovascular fitness and heart health. Dance is centred around repetition, and through consistently performing the same physical activity, stamina is built over time. In training, you take class every day, and this engagement instils a habit of consistency which is then transferred into life beyond training. From this basis, consistency in physical activity – whether that is through dance or something else, contributes to long-term stamina and cardiovascular health. These health-promoting habits developed through dance provide a valuable boost of energy for everyday activities, from chasing after kids to commuting or pursuing hobbies. When my students groan about the length of practical sessions or plead to skip ‘one more run-through’ of the routine, I always remind them how crucial stamina is – not just for dance, but for life. Those who complete dance training emerge physically fit, a quality that supports any career or life path they choose to follow.

Equally the precision required in dance, such as maintaining proper posture whilst doing a full plie in ballet and controlling movements in and out of the floor in release-based contemporary techniques, strengthens the core, improves balance, and reduces the risk of injury in everyday life. Dance also promotes joint mobility, reduces stiffness, and increases range of motion. These benefits translate directly to everyday life, improving physical efficiency, confidence, and well-being. For example, the core strength developed in dance helps maintain proper alignment, reducing back pain and supporting better ergonomics while sitting, standing, or lifting. My students are always encouraged to do a one-minute plank prior to any session, and this consistent physical engagement will maintain core stability, supporting a wide range of daily activities and improving overall functionality. For example, many in the working world spend long hours at a desk, and this static, hunched posture can cause physical strain. Dance training could help this – for example, the plank previously mentioned could enhance posture and maintain your core, preventing health issues developing from sitting at a desk. Equally, attending a dance class in an evening can loosen your joints and allow for full, effective blood flow. The benefits of dance training are not limited to those pursuing it as a professional career.

Balance and coordination gained from dance training translate to smoother and safer movements in daily tasks too, such as navigating

stairs, carrying shopping, or even walking on uneven surfaces. These may seem like easy tasks for those in their 20s–40s, but as the body ages these become harder if physical fitness is not maintained. The same can be said of maintaining flexibility and joint mobility. Continuing with the exercises taught during training will maintain the ability to perform everyday physical activities like reaching for high shelves or bending. Contemporary techniques like Cunningham and Graham specifically target balance and coordination, while ballet strengthens these abilities through every movement. For instance, a simple series of pliés works to engage the core, improve ankle stability, and enhance knee alignment – all key for maintaining balance and preventing falls. Exercises like these, when practised regularly, directly support the body's functionality in daily tasks and help preserve mobility as we age.

Take a breath

As a physical activity, these benefits of dance to the body are perhaps more immediately evident. But, for me, it's the connection between mind and body that makes dance such a powerful and desirable approach to improving health. In every style of dance training, the use of breath is central, serving as the foundation for movement and physicality. This focus on breath is a transferable skill that can enhance countless aspects of life, offering tools for mindfulness, stress management, and greater physical awareness.

I often find myself turning to breath as a source of grounding. In moments of tension or fatigue, taking a deep breath in for the count of 7 and releasing it slowly for the count of 11 feels like hitting a reset button. My heart steadies, my shoulders soften, and even the smallest muscles – like those in my toes – seem to let go of their grip.

In dance training, breath control is a foundational skill that enhances both physical performance and overall well-being. Proper breathing techniques improve stamina, which is crucial during long rehearsal days and performances. By regulating breathing, dancers can maintain energy levels and manage physical exertion. Conscious breathing also expands movement range and coordination, making movements more fluid and expressive. For example, exhaling during weightier movements, such as rolls to the floor, amplifies physicality and impact.

Although there may not be specific 'breathing lessons' in training, techniques like yoga help integrate breath control into dance practice. I use mindful breathing in my own classes, starting each session with a technique called *seven–eleven*, which encourages a longer exhale than inhale to promote relaxation. I find this practice helps students calm their bodies and minds, allowing them to focus on the technical aspects of their training. This calm can help remedy the tendency for dancers to hold their breath during complex sequences, instigated by our body's fight-or-flight response. Through training, we learn to control nervous breathing and use techniques like *three-dimensional breathing* to fully engage our lung capacity, improving stamina and supporting overall performance.

In contexts beyond the dance studio, breath control can be a tool for physical and mental resilience. In our overstimulated, stressful lives, chronic dysregulation of the nervous system can take a toll on physical health, leading to issues like high blood pressure and weakened immunity. Incorporating mindful practices like diaphragmatic breathing – such as the ‘seven–eleven’ technique – can calm the nervous system, reduce stress, and build resilience. While vital for dancers in performance, this breath control benefits anyone seeking balance and improved well-being in their daily life.

At the core of this discussion about transferable skills lies the fact that physical training, such as dance, can support the long-term health outcomes of students regardless of whether they continue a career in dance. Research supports this, with studies revealing that dance can improve aerobic capacity, muscle strength, and balance in adults with hearing loss and mental health challenges (Cobo Ruiz, Ros Ruiz, and Allam 2023) and help prevent falls in older adults (Malkogeorgos et al. 2011). For adolescent girls, contemporary dance enhances aerobic fitness, upper body strength, and self-esteem (Connolly, Quin, and Redding 2011). Dance can be highly effective in improving health and well-being across our lifespan, and dance training provides students with a high level of physical stamina and strength; a repertoire of exercises to continue to engage with; enhanced mind–body connection; and the habit of consistent physical practice. Dance students in higher education perceive health and well-being holistically, developing resilience and self-care practices despite challenges like transitions and injuries (Paschali and Araújo 2021). Formal dance training is also associated with positive effects on self-concept, perceived wellness, and academic performance (Carter 2005).

There are times in my life where I have encountered opinions of dance that equate to it being thought of as a ‘non-academic’ subject, a subject that will not lead to work, that it is simply ‘floating about’. I know this is not true. Some of the greatest minds have danced, and I have experienced how dance has use that goes far beyond the perfection we see on stage. The disciplined practice of dance teaches both physical engagement and breath control, promoting mindfulness and resilience. I am a dancer; I have endured years of rigorous training that, yes, have made me skilled in my art-form, but also have equipped me with a range of skills that are relatable to all stages of life. These benefits are seen by those in training and can be disseminated to our ever-growing communities in a range of participatory settings. More and more we are seeing an increase in movement for the elderly classes via falls prevention programmes, as well as early years dance classes that help babies and their parents navigate those early parenting years. The delivery of this important participatory community work will be via the graduating dance artists in our midst, addressing critical issues related to physical inactivity and improving general well-being in the wider population. The impact of dance training goes far beyond one more individual on a stage in a Tutu – it is a transferable, beneficial tool used to enhance both personal and community health and well-being.

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Alice Marshall (Vale) is a Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader for Dance at the University of Derby. As Artistic Director of Adaire to Dance, she creates accessible contemporary works that engage new audiences. Her collaborations with Illuminos produce visually striking performances that spark dialogue on social issues. Alice's research explores dance's accessibility and impact, contributing to academic discussions with Routledge credentials. Blending choreography, pedagogy, and advocacy, she uses dance as a tool for meaningful change, inspiring and educating through her innovative practice.