

ACTIVITY PAGES

Muscle Memory

Have you ever heard the African expression “if you can walk you can dance, if you can talk you can sing”? Well, there’s more to that than you think!



Dance is made up of constantly changing shapes that you see with your eyes when you are watching it, or feel with your body when you are doing it. The way dances are learned is most often by **seeing** and by **imitating** the movement of another human being. Whatever kind of dance a person is doing, whether it’s in a dance studio, village square, religious ceremony or a nightclub, people usually learn by watching other people dance, and then trying it themselves.

After the imitation comes the learning, which is through **repetition** and building up the **muscle memory** of the movement in your body. Music can help with this, giving you clues that you can hear, in rhythm or melody. Sometimes word clues can also help people remember what to do when, or clarify how it should feel or look.

Even if you think you’ve never learned a dance in your life, you’ve gone through this process of body learning lots of times! When you learned how to walk or skip, brush your teeth, jump rope, ride a bicycle, or play hand games, all of these activities were learned through your body! Can you think of any more movement activities that you learned recently? How many times did you have to do it before it felt so familiar that you didn’t have to think about it any more - like “second nature?”

Here are a couple of experiments to try (or for teachers to guide your class through):

PART ONE

Step 1 – Person 1: (Note - Person 2 don’t watch yet!)

Make up a series of 6 frozen shapes for your body. Next, connect the shapes to make it into a short dance of 6 movements, moving from one shape to the next. (For help on varying movement qualities for your dance, see the activity Movement Games.)

Make your movements simple but very precise, and figure out exactly how you want them to feel and to look. Practice in the mirror, at least 10 times, so that you can do it by heart, and really make this dance your own.



Step 2 – Now person 1, you are going to teach it to person 2, but **ONLY WITH WORDS**. Stand back to back with person 2 so that you can’t see each other, and then describe for them how to make the dance. No questions, answers, or corrections and don’t show them with your body, or touch them!

Step 3 – Now face each other and person 2, show what you have learned to your partner. Then, person 1, show person 2 the original dance that you made up.

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What did you discover? Were the two dances exactly the same, pretty similar, or really different?

Questions for Person 1:

How did you pick the words you used to teach your dance? Did you pick words that described how the dance FEELS or how it LOOKS (or both)?

Did person 2 do "your" dance? How close did they get to recreating what you intended?

Can you think of other words you could have used to help them get closer?

Remember that everyone moves differently

Questions for Person 2:

How did you know what your partner wanted you to do?

What senses and tools did you use to learn the dance?

If you were doing it differently, what would help you get closer to what they intended?

PART TWO

Step 1 – Person 1, make up a dance (see step 1 above).

Step 2 – Now teach it to your partner by **SHOWING** them the movements only. **NO TALKING**. Repeat the pattern 10 times, while person 2 watches and imitates what you are doing. Don't touch them or correct them.

Step 3 – Then, person 2, show the dance that you learned to person 1.

Step 4 – Person 1 now show the original dance to person 2.

What did you discover? How was this a different learning experience? Were the two dances exactly the same, pretty similar, or really different?

Questions for Person 1:

What was it like teaching your dance without speaking?

Did person 2 do "your" dance? How close did they get to recreating what you intended?

Questions for Person 2:

How was this a different learning experience?

What senses and tools did you use to learn this dance?

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What could help you get closer to what they intended?

PART THREE

Try the exercise one last time, this time using the techniques of both watching and imitating, and using words to help clarify the dance for the learner. What have you learned about your body's memory?

OPTIONAL

Change roles so that person 1 is 2, and 2 is 1, and repeat the entire exercise.

VARIATION

Imagine that person 2 is clay and teach them the dance by sculpting them. What did you discover about teaching movement with physical touch rather than talking or showing?