

Bharatanatyam

Dancing for the Gods

GRADE K-5

Introduction

Age Group: 5-10 (US Grades: K-5)

Welcome

Movement is integral to the learning process of very young children.

Children at this stage are whole-body movers who tend toward perpetual motion giving them an aesthetic avenue for creatively expressing feelings and imaginative stories informed by their inner fantasy worlds and their real lives. In upper elementary school, children become increasingly keen observers of their world. Capable of complex patterns of logic, they like to analyze and define people, activities, situations and events. They enjoy inventing games, working cooperatively on group projects, and creating secret codes and personal languages. Structured dance experiences and ongoing participation with each other help them to develop the following skills and understandings:

- **Physical:** Self-control, development and refinement of gross motor skills, and understanding of the relationship between their bodies and the space around them.
- **Social/affective:** Listening, responding, taking turns, respecting others' opinions and working cooperatively in a group.
- **Cognitive:** Recognizing, recalling, classifying, identifying, differentiating and sequencing/generating movements.
- **Aesthetic:** Choosing and expressing preference for dance movements, revising and refining movements and recognizing varied notions of beauty in dance.
- **Metacognitive:** Reflecting on their own and classmates' dancing and placing it in a wider cross-cultural context.

Instructional Time

Children in K-5 should take dance class one period per week throughout the school year. Some schools have chosen to fold the equivalent amount of instructional time into a concentrated cycle. For the purposes of a sequential curriculum, however, the consistency of full-year work is preferable. The dance teacher can be an excellent resource for professional development of all early childhood teachers, as young children should be moving periodically every day in their classes.

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Activity area 1: **Dance Making**

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SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

Task: **Introducing Isolations**

Go to the section called **Head, Eyes & Neck** (path: Basic Technique / Head, Eyes & Neck). Ask your students to observe the different movements in the sub-sections. Show three or four of the short demonstration videos on the screen and ask the students to try them. How many of the Head, Eyes & Neck gestures can your students follow? Which ones are easy, which ones need a lot of repetition to get right?

After this, go to **Hand Gestures** (path: Basic Technique / Hand Gestures) and repeat the exercise. How flexible are your students' fingers?

IMPROVISATION

Task: **Having a conversation**

Ask the students to pair up. Then suggest that they try to have a conversation moving only the Head. Then they can add the Eyes... and finally the Neck (using movements from the section **Head, Eyes & Neck**).

Suggest the second student guesses at what the first student is trying to say, and vice versa (a little like charades).

The exercise can be repeated, adding Hand Gestures this time (path: Basic Technique / Hand Gestures).

CHOREOGRAPHY

Task: **Creating a narrative**

Ask each student to pick five hand gestures (you could even get them to choose out of a hat!). Each student is then asked to develop a story using the five gestures s/he has picked. It could be an everyday story – not necessarily a myth or legend (in fact, contemporary stories should be encouraged!)

Now each student should pick a new set of five gestures to tell the same story. How do the new gestures change the way they tell the story?

PERFORMANCE

Task: **Creating a short performance**

The task now is for each pair to expand the story they have been expressing with gestures (see previous activity, Choreography) into a short performance.

The performance will have three principal components:

- **An entrance**
- **The main story**
- **An exit**

Performance adds the dimension of the lower body. Your students are now moving freely around the space. You should give them a defined amount of time – say, 3 minutes – in which to tell the story.

You can suggest some specific patterns for use of space: should they enter slowly or quickly as the story begins? Should they move in a circle, or in a diagonal line?

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Activity area 2: **Dance Literacy**

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UNDERSTANDING DANCE

With the course projected on a large screen (or interactive whiteboard) select the **Course Map** icon (small icon on right bottom corner of screen) and go to the **Direct a Drama!** section. Select the story called **Naughty Little Boy**. In collaboration with your students, make movement choices and watch the results. Repeat the exercise, noting the differences in interpretation of the story. Don't forget to use the **Expert Commentary** button for insights into the artistic implications of each choice.

Discuss with your class the implications of the choices they have made, in terms of how the finished narrative is presented. How do their choices affect the overall tone and mood of the story?

APPLYING VOCABULARY

With the course projected on a large screen (or interactive whiteboard) show the demonstration videos from **Double-hand gestures** (path: Basic Technique / Hand Gestures / Double-hand gestures).

Discuss the application examples from some of the videos. Can the students think of two other applications for a given gesture?

Show the gait called **Mayoori from Lower Body** (path: Basic Technique / Lower Body / Gaits / Mayoori) – it is the walk of the peacock. What other animals from the Gaits can the students imitate? Can they invent walks and movements from other animals, not featured in the program? A cat maybe, or even a non-mammal such as a fish or a bird?

ANALYZING MOVEMENT

Go to **Kartari Adavu** (path: Body Combinations / Pure Movement / Adavu / Kartari Adavu).

Ask the students to observe closely the movement of the dancer in the demonstration video. Then ask the students to sketch out on paper some of the motions that the dancer is creating in space. Encourage them not to be inhibited as they draw – the pattern does not need to be 'pretty'. Then click on **Movement Analysis**. Students can compare their own version with the graphics and commentary presented by the program.

Repeat this exercise with the other Adavus in the section.

COMPARING DANCE STYLES

For this exercise, make a selection of some DVDs of western ballet – for this age group *The Nutcracker* works well. Select an excerpt and show it to the class. Then you can play the video of the **Alarippu** (access it from the Course Map).

To begin with, ask the students to focus on specific aspects of each form of dance – the dancer's use of feet, use of eyes, costume etc. What differences can they identify between the two styles?

You can repeat this exercise with other forms of dance – try some of the modern greats such as Martha Graham or Merce Cunningham.

Bharatanatyam

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GRADE K-5

Activity area 3: **Making Connections**

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HISTORY AND CULTURE

To prepare for this session, find some top-level information (preferably on DVD) on the history of different dance forms from around the world (ballet/tango/hip-hop etc). Then go to Origins of **Bharatanatyam** on the DVD (path: Introduction / Origins) and play the video to the class [5 minutes approx.]

After the video, initiate a discussion on the history of dance across the world, paying attention to how different styles have influenced each other. In the Origins of Bharatanatyam video, we see how Anna Pavlova influenced the history of Indian dance. Try to find a video of the Ruth St. Denis piece *Incense* (recently revived by the Martha Graham Company). You can describe the ways in which St. Denis was influenced by Oriental dances to create the piece.

Are there any students in the class who are learning (or have been told about) other dance-forms? Invite them to share what they've learned with the class.

CONNECTING WITH OTHER ARTS

Ask your students each to choose a sculpture, painting or photograph that inspires them to tell a story. Ask them to present their selected artwork and describe the story it suggests to them.

Each student should now choose a number of gestures and movements (minimum 2) from **Basic Technique**. In this phase of the exercise, the students can use their chosen movements as tools to express the story that has been inspired by the work of art.

Remind your students that this is a non-verbal task. They need to try to express the story through movement.

After each presentation, initiate a discussion with the group to analyze the storytelling. Invite each student to discuss the challenges of expressing the story through a limited range of movements from an unfamiliar culture, without the use of spoken text.

USING TECHNOLOGY

Using an LCD projector connected to your PC or Mac (or interactive whiteboard) the games and tasks contained within **Dancing for the Gods** can become activities for students both individually and as a group.

In particular, the exercise called **Nritya & Naatyam** (path: Body Combinations / Emotional Power / Saatvika abhinaya) and the Direct a Drama! section offer engaging tasks to help build characters and dances.

Also see the **Fun & Games** section to see how technology can be used as a creative tool.

Go to the Course Map and look for the **Now you Try!** webcam icon next to each of the movements in Basic Technique (as well as the **Nataraja** page, where the same feature is called Compose your Pose).

In this innovative exercise, students can record themselves following the motions from a demonstration video (note: a high-bandwidth Internet connection is required for the webcam to function).

You can have fun with this feature. Experiment with setting up the webcam in the classroom, in front of a performance space where students can practice the movements 'on camera' and then compare their results against the demonstration video.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Using video excerpts from a number of different dance performances, ask your students to closely observe the dancers' posture and use of breath. Discuss with the class the use of the 'core'. (The core is located roughly a hand's breadth below the navel)

Now open the page called **Some Key Terms** (path: Basic Technique / Some Key Terms). This page has a number of sub-sections that examine the importance of posture, breath, levels, verticality etc. These concepts are important to understand both for elegant expression and the avoidance of injury. In particular, draw your students' attention to the sub-sections called Get Vertical! and Breathe!

Now ask your students to divide into pairs. Each member of the pair should perform the Adavu (learned in Activity 1, **Skills and Technique**). As they perform, their partner should closely observe and provide feedback on body posture and breathing. In particular, the observing partner should pay attention to potential over-arching or the distribution of weight in the wrong areas of the body.

Remind your students of the importance of observation, playing a critical role in helping fellow dancers to avoid injury.

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Activity area 4: **Community and Cultural Resources**

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ENGAGING WITH INSTITUTIONS

Find out the location of an Indian dance studio or a Hindu temple near to your community. Many temples offer classes and performances in Indian dance and music. Ask if your students can observe or even participate in a community class.

Before the field trip, show the video called [Origins of Bharatanatyam](#) (path: Introduction / Origins). You can also show the sequence called What are you saying? (path: Basic Technique / Some Key Terms / What are you saying?). Both these sequences place Bharatanatyam in a historical and contemporary cultural context, which will be good preparation for a trip to the temple.

A local museum or library may be offering exhibitions of Indian art. They often have visiting artists who give demonstrations, workshops and performances. Seeing a live dancer is one of the best ways to enhance our deeper understanding of the culture and its dance.

USING RESEARCH RESOURCES

Encourage your students to look for books in the school or local public library that go deeper into the background of Indian art. Suggest that they select one particular aspect of the course and find external material related to it. The **Nataraja** section may be a good starting point (path: Body Combinations / Emotional Power / Aangika abhinaya / The Nataraja).

On the Internet there are many sites dedicated to Indian classical dance: www.narthaki.com is a good example as are: www.kadam.org.uk/pulse.php and www.sruti.com. It is always worth looking at arts programming offered by local TV stations. Some more national and international sites offering access to a range of arts programming are the BBC (www.bbc.co.uk) and PBS (www.pbs.org).

Many fine examples of different dance forms and performers are available on the video sharing site YouTube (www.youtube.com)

In addition, your local Indian Association can easily be traced through the Internet or just asking around. These associations will be happy to provide information on touring shows, workshops, exhibitions and any other cultural activities that are due to take place in your area.

There are periodicals and publications to South Asian dance. The UK magazine Pulse is a good example, as is the newspaper India Abroad (www.indiaabroad.com)

SHARING BETWEEN SCHOOLS

Ask your students if they have a friend outside of class who is learning Indian dance. You could invite this person to share a workshop at your school.

Alternatively, if there is an interesting artist in the community, or a touring artist or group is visiting your area, you could initiate a shared workshop with a neighboring school. This can be a powerful interaction for your students as, through the workshop, they get to meet and make friends with other students who have been learning about the arts. What experiences can they share? What can they learn from each other's approach?

You may feel ready to mount a 'partner school' dance drama featuring some elements of Bharatanatyam. You could take one of the Myths & Stories in the **Nataraja** section (path: Body Combinations/Emotional Power / Aangika abhinaya / Nataraja) and assign each of your students a 'buddy' from the partner school. Encourage your students to exchange ideas with their buddies. Together, they can develop the theme and story before coming together for rehearsals in a live setting.

Joint activities of this type provide excellent opportunities for building powerful life-skills such as teamwork and leadership.