

Teaching and Learning by Emma Pyke

Part One - Identifying your teaching style

Generally new teachers, who have had no previous teaching experience teach as either they themselves were taught or as they themselves learn. Which doesn't mean that it's a bad thing – just that as teachers of a visual art form we need to be aware that not everyone learns in the same way. If we cannot adapt our teaching methods to encompass all our students then we will not develop their full potential and also possibly stifle our own enjoyment of teaching.

It could be assumed by teachers that students can all learn by the teacher-demonstration: student-follow method. And indeed in the early stages of learning - the way to understand moves is by muscle memory, drills and repetition. Beginners like the comfort of really knowing moves inside out as it gives an immense amount of satisfaction that at the end of each class they can do 2-3 new moves and also early on in their training transition skills can be learnt without a lot of extra thought input – so they feel like they are really dancing. The problem lies with teachers who cannot break out of the box - and address new ways of teaching with the increasingly complexity of belly dance as the level of the classes increases.

A number of years ago I conducted a survey amongst local students of their learning style (see table below). What was immediately apparent was that although we are learning a visual art and therefore a majority of our learning and teaching was done visually, that a small proportion of experienced dancers (3 years plus) still needed to have auditory input and to a lesser extent tactile input (“hands-on”) to really understand the technique. Why was this surprising? Well because although teachers can carry on with the method described above, some students still needed to explore other methods of assimilating the information. And it is this fact that can make or break a teacher's success in continuing classes into higher levels and also help when teaching workshops. I was more surprised actually by the number of dancers surveyed who preferred to use teachers choreography notes than write their own as I have always encouraged people to write combinations etc in their own words as it should make more sense to you when you are practicing outside of the classroom environment.

How many times have you been to a workshop by a teacher who is relatively unknown to you to find that they give you everything you need to execute technique – yet well-known dancers don't seem to know how to adapt to your own needs for learning? As teachers, we can become accustomed to the comfort of our own classes and students – in much the same way that students like the security of classes and would never venture forth in to the workshop world.

Questions	Options	Percentage Answer
<i>I prefer to get new movements</i>	a) Visually, by seeing demonstration	63
	b) Auditory – listening to description	3
	c) Actively – by doing immediately	31.7
<i>I understand movement more clearly after I</i>	a) try them out	87
	b) think them through	13
<i>If I struggle with the concept of a new movement I prefer to</i>	a) watch the teacher and try and copy	86
	b) feel the teacher to see how their body works	0
	c) to have the teacher guide me physically	7
	d) to try in privacy of my own home before asking	7
<i>When learning a new choreography I</i>	a) need to have a written copy of notes in the teachers words	22.6
	b) need to write it in my own words	1
	c) prefer to do it solely form memory with the music	18.6
	d) needs lots of repetition of the same combinations to commit to memory	50.7

There have been many studies of learning styles – but only one or two actually applied to belly dance. For learning in general David Kolb developed a model in 1984, which explains four preferences which present as

learning methods:

- Doing (active experimentation)
- Watching (reflective observation)
- Feeling (concrete experience)
- Thinking (abstract conceptualization)
- Combinations of where our preference lies on each axis produces four different learning style types:
- Activist – doing/feeling
- Reflector – watching/doing
- Theorist – watching/thinking
- Pragmatist- thinking/doing.

Knowing your own and students learning style enables learning to be orientated according to the individuals needs. Everyone responds to and needs the stimulus of all types of learning style – it is a matter of using emphasis that fits best with each individual learner. The next part in this series will focus more on learning styles and how you as a teacher or learner can adapt to obtain the best from each other.