

Special Educational Needs Students and Language of Dance

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At Brockenhurst College, SEN students are given the opportunity to study a wide range of courses, including dance. I have been working with SEN students at Brockenhurst for the past 8 years, teaching dance and yoga to students with a range of Special Needs, including Down's Syndrome, Autism and Asperger's Syndrome as well as those who are physically disabled.

Many of the students, especially those with Down's Syndrome, respond very positively to music. They greatly enjoy moving to music and are able to improvise some very creative and interesting dance steps. This made me think that the students would also respond well to Language of Dance.

Language of Dance uses symbols from structured Labanotation, but in a simplified form known as motif writing. The course I teach for SEN students uses up to 8 of the symbols, which represent the basic elements of dance movement. These are travelling, stillness, body shape, balance, springing, rotation, flexion and extension.

The students begin by exploring each of these elements. For example, I encourage the students to demonstrate as many different ways of travelling as possible, (e.g. walking, running, crawling, sliding). The students do this exercise to music and can often fit their chosen modes of travelling to the rhythm and mood of the music.

After the students have completed their exploration, they are introduced to the corresponding symbol. The symbols are printed on A4 size flash cards and after several weeks, many of the students can recognise and remember all 8 of the symbols. In order to reinforce the student's recognition, a game like musical statues can be used. This involves the students moving freely to music. The music is then paused and a symbol is presented to them. The students call out the name of the symbol and perform the relevant movement in their own

way. The music then continues and the game repeats, using all the symbols in a random order.

Many other games and activities can be used to help the students to remember the symbols and use them creatively. In order to encourage choreography skills, mini cards (which are the same as the flash cards but significantly smaller) are used. The students work in pairs and each pair is given 5 - 8 mini cards. The students are then asked to lay them out on the floor in an order of their choice and perform the relevant movements in which ever manner they choose, thus creating their own sequence. They then perform their sequence to the rest of the group, using music.

Working with the symbols improves communication and interaction between group members. Some of the students (often especially those who are Autistic) find it difficult to work with others. However, with some encouragement and gentle persuasion, after a while I usually see an improvement in their interactive skills.

I think this is because the students do not necessarily need to speak in order to communicate meaning when using the symbols. They can simply point to a symbol or demonstrate a movement if they wish. Then, once they have had some successful non-verbal and non-confrontational interactions, they have more confidence and find it easier to communicate verbally. It is also one of the perhaps rare occasions when a student is given freedom of choice. It is up to them to decide what to do and how to do it, rather than being told or shown what to do. This, therefore, promotes decision making skills and greater independence, as well as a sense of achievement and independence for the student.

Performing their sequence in front of other group members can be a daunting prospect, but I find that again with some encouragement and perhaps with the help of a support worker, the students are usually happy to do so. This is a great way of helping to improve confidence and awareness of others in the group. It also helps to bring the group closer together as the 'audience' are encouraged to applaud after the performance and give positive feedback.

Obviously, students will have differing levels of ability and these exercises can be modified to suit almost any level. Less able students can be aided by support workers or even other students and can concentrate on using just a few symbols in different ways. Whereas, more able students can be introduced to more complex games, involving remembering all the symbols. They can then create longer and more adventurous sequences and link their choreography more closely to the music, deciding exactly how many counts each movement will take. Some students are also able to draw the symbols and can therefore notate their own sequences.

I have found using Language of Dance with SEN students an extremely interesting and rewarding process. I continue to perfect and develop my ideas constantly as each new group I work with brings its own dynamic and challenges and therefore more opportunities for further progression.