



Nurturing the Novices

Invest in your school's
future with a
teacher-training program

By Holly Derville-Teer

HIRING TEACHERS WHO HAVE NO EXPERIENCE

can be rough. These first-timers are bound to make endless mistakes as they find their way. However, when one of your former (or even current) students is applying for a job on your teaching staff, you may want to give him or her that opportunity. Often someone who has a history with your school will support your vision in ways an outside person might not. But don't simply hire untrained teachers and toss them into the classroom; instead, consider making their addition to the staff contingent on completing a teacher-training program.

In 1998 I took over Chehalem Valley Dance Academy (CVDA) in Newberg, Oregon. New to the area and finding it difficult to find dance teachers, I hired my first student-turned-teacher in 1999. As it became necessary to hire additional students, I realized that I wanted to support and develop them more fully. From 2002 until I sold the studio in 2009, I guided six former students through a training program that I developed, and all of them became successful teachers.

Although I have trained multiple students simultaneously, I found that working with one at a time yielded a better result because it allowed me to tailor the training to that person. And it's less draining on the person who is in charge, since directing the trainees takes focus, guidance, and energy. I do not recommend training anyone you do

not plan to hire within the next year.

This program can be completed in as little time as a month or as long as a year. Its duration depends on how many in-class teaching evaluation sessions you feel each person needs and on how soon you need your new teacher. Some trainees may need two evaluation sessions; others may need eight or more.

If you know that one of your teachers will be leaving at the end of a season, hire someone to assist that teacher and train him or her over the course of the year. If you need an immediate replacement, you can elect to train the new teacher even while he or she is teaching. Obviously, the more time you spend evaluating and giving feedback to new teachers, the more they will learn under your guidance.

Through teacher training, you can support first-year teachers and give them valuable skills that would normally take years to master if they had to figure things out on their own. Preparing and creating this kind of program takes only a few hours, and you can use it with every first-year teacher you hire for the rest of your career. Write the outline of the program in packet form with a page for each step.

Be clear about your expectations. Tell the trainees that if they don't show promise as they go through the program, you may not hire them. They not only have to go through the program, they have to grow and excel.



Teacher-in-training Brynn Sylvester, here being evaluated by studio owner Holly Derville-Teer, says, "I learned so much during the evaluation process. . . . It really helped me become the teacher I am today." **OPPOSITE:** Sylvester asks students to practice raising their hands.

Step 1: TRAINEE INTERVIEWS YOUR STAFF

One of the primary goals of this program is to get potential new teachers to develop their own opinions and beliefs about the dance-teaching process. Write down approximately 25 questions that you think would be useful for the trainees, and then have them schedule interviews with each member of your staff.

Often, established teachers enjoy being interviewed; you are letting them know that you value their opinions

I think as a senior-level teacher, the new teachers took what I had to say to heart," he says. And he saw benefits to himself: "It also made me think about my own teaching in a deeper way."

In addition to gathering valuable information, the trainees will begin to develop their own teaching philosophy, teaching methods, and identity as a teacher as they go through the interview process. Tell them to write down the answers to their questions and save them for a debriefing

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and what they bring to your school. I always made the interview portion of the training process optional, but my staff consistently told me that they enjoyed passing on their wisdom to the next generation of teachers. I never had anyone refuse to participate.

As ballet director at CVDA, Casey Davenport participated in training four pre-ballet teachers, and he says the time required wasn't a burden. "I enjoy teaching teachers.

at the end of the program.

Questions could include the following (and ask the trainees to think of some questions of their own):

- In which areas do you hope to see growth in your dancers by the end of the year?
- What do you enjoy most about teaching?
- What is the worst thing that you had to handle while



Sylvester helps a dancer with her arabesque while Derville-Teer evaluates and prepares feedback for later.

you were teaching? How did you handle it?

- How do you make your classes fun?
- How do you make boys feel comfortable in your class?
- What are some of the challenges of being a dance teacher?
- How do you handle discipline in your classes?
- What advice on choreography can you give me?
- What do you wish someone had told you before you started teaching?

Sometimes teachers will have entirely different opinions or responses to a question. View this as a positive aspect of the interviewing process; it will help the trainees see that there are many possible approaches to the same situation. Hearing varying and sometimes opposing opinions will

help them find their own way.

Amanda Riley, who completed her training in 2004 and taught pre-ballet at CVDA for three years, says, "I loved my teacher training. The staff had great advice on teaching and how to deal with many different situations. [I learned] to communicate with the kids in a way that they understood and liked. Casey [Davenport] taught me how to incorporate the discipline of ballet into pre-ballet without it being too much for the younger ages."

Step 2: EVALUATING

Evaluating novice teachers is a critical part of the training process. Observing your trainees as they teach and then offering feedback should enable them to progress quickly. You could have them teach someone else's classes a few

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For Derville-Teer (left), debriefing potential new teachers about what they learned is part of the training process.

times while having that teacher assist or have them teach one of your classes while you watch. The most beneficial classes for student teachers to assist and be evaluated in are those they will be taking over.

In addition to observing the trainees, consider paying them to assist a class during their training, until they have a class of their own. Many new teachers will accept a lower training rate with the understanding that they will get their own classes at a higher rate next session.

Schedule evaluation meetings immediately after each trainee-taught class. Be sure to tell the trainees how much you believe in them and point out the great choices they made when they were teaching. Then explain what you would like them to work on, being specific about ideas for growth in those areas. I often emphasized their tone of voice, control of the class, ability to make the class enjoyable, overall professionalism, and approach to teaching technique.

Brynn Sylvester grew up taking classes at CVDA. After graduating from Western Oregon University with a degree in dance in 2006, she applied for a teaching position. I knew my pre-ballet teacher would be leaving the following year, so I hired Sylvester to assist with her classes and I put her through the teacher-training program for one year. She currently teaches at two CVDA locations as well as at the Multnomah Athletic Club and Billings Performing Arts Center.

Sylvester says that the evaluation process taught her “that I am not just teaching pre-ballet, I am teaching discipline and the basic skills of functioning in a class: how to follow directions, how to raise their hands when they have a question, how to be quiet during class.” She says she learned how to get her ideas across more effectively by presenting them as stories and the importance of making the students feel important by calling them by name as

much as possible. And, she says, she learned that “I was too polite with the kids. Saying ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you’ so much was taking away my power in the class and creating discipline problems.”

Sylvester says that another teacher who received training at CVDA, Kimberly Harris, told her “not to be afraid to take risks in my choreography. She said not to be afraid to stay true to myself. I learned so much during the evaluation process. I trained for a year and was evaluated by several members of the staff. It really helped me become the teacher I am today.”

Step 3: SUMMARIZING

Encourage trainees to continue to develop their own identity as teachers by asking them to answer questions similar to the ones they used to interview others. For example:

- How do you plan to approach discipline problems?
- How will you make your classes enjoyable?
- What is the number one thing you learned from each teacher you interviewed?

In addition to the questions, ask the trainees to write out flexible lesson plans for the year, including what they hope to accomplish in each class they will be teaching. They can complete this during or after the evaluation process; however, they must complete the interviews first, because they will be drawing on the information they gathered. Your feedback will help them understand what you expect them to accomplish in each class.

Step 4: DEBRIEFING

Once the trainees have completed the program, schedule an appointment during which they will present you with their completed packets. Take the time to go through their paperwork with them during their appointment. Ask questions about their experiences and comment on their answers. Go over your plans for their future employment. Give them any necessary paperwork to fill out (W-2, contract, etc.) and clarify their pay. If you have one, give them a copy of your school’s handbook and review important policies with them. If you don’t have a handbook, make sure to discuss policies such as music content, handling injuries, expected arrival times for teachers, how to handle disruptive parents, and when to pass along a problem to the director.

An investment

If training teachers sounds too time-consuming, remember that it’s an investment in your school’s future and in the success of your first-year teachers. With your support and expertise, they will become valuable additions to your staff. ♦