



Nicholas Long, Tap and Jazz dance teacher  
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## Are we creating a motivational climate in studios that is conducive for learning?

A discussion on learning environments we set when working towards examinations and competitions.

Charmaine Tay, June 2020

As a young dancer, have you ever wondered why you enjoyed or learnt more in certain dance classes than others? What was it in that dance class that made you look forward to wanting to learn more? Now as a dance teacher, does your teaching style make your students feel the way you did about that class you really liked when you were younger?

In 2008, Gladwell<sup>3</sup> explained that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice are needed to acquire proficiency in a skill. *But is that all it really takes in dance?* Will an allegro (fast movements) combination be perfect after practicing for 10,000 hours? Perhaps not quite. Between 2009-2017, dance psychology researchers Quested and Duda had released multiple research findings showing that in dance, the quality of training develops the skills and prolongs the career-life of the performer<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>. It is known that teachers play a major role in supporting the psychological welfare of

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the students in the studio. If well supported, it will result in optimal performance<sup>8</sup>. So how can we as teachers use motivational science to create a conducive environment for learning?

## Using psychological theories to improve the learning environment in studios.

Motivational science is recognised as valuable means to unravel underlying motivations in the learning process. The benefits of creating an empowering climate in the studio has been shown to yield positive learning outcomes<sup>1</sup>. This week, we will be using the Achievement Goal Theory (AGT), a social-cognitive theory of achievement motivation, to understand types of coach-created environment and its effects on students' learning<sup>9</sup>. The theory explains the characteristics of two different motivational climates that may be empowering or disempowering to students<sup>10</sup>, and perhaps, it is a good time to reflect on our teaching styles and the type of learning behaviours it might breed in the studio.



Nicholas Long with fellow dancers

Photo credits: Nicholas Long, Instagram

## How do you define success to your students?

There are more than one way in which we can define success: we could either win a competition or we could dance better than we did yesterday. The theory discusses a social situation created between the teacher and the student with regards to goal orientations. Depending on the goal orientation set by the teacher, the perception of success or failure within the dance class would cause students to behave and learn differently<sup>11</sup>. The two climates that differ can be referred to as ego-involving and/or task-involving motivational climate. The table below provides characteristics of each of the climates, based on the teaching goals set in class<sup>4,5,6,12,14,15,18</sup>.

Ego- involving	Task-involving
Students are evaluated in comparison to peers	Students are evaluated based on personal progression
Teacher is in control of learning	Students are provided a degree of control over learning
Grouping is based on ability	Each group has a mix of different abilities.

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More focused on end result	Focus on the process
Mistakes are punished and shamed	Mistakes are accepted as part of learning and explained for further understanding

Task-oriented environments focus on the development of competence, effort levels and improving abilities whereas ego-oriented environments emphasise on social comparisons and establishing superiority<sup>12</sup>. These learning environments are usually attributed to the motivational climate set in the studio by the teacher, leading towards certain learning behaviours in dance students<sup>11</sup>:

## Difference in learning behaviours<sup>4,5,6,12,14,15,18</sup>:

Ego-involving	Task-involving
Avoid challenging task in fear of failure	View challenging tasks as opportunity to learn.
Belief that learning occurs quickly or not at all	Belief that learning occurs at different rates
Scales back effort when faced with negative outcome.	Increase efforts if faced with negative outcome
Attribute failure to personal inadequacy	Attribute failure to lack of effort
Outperform peers (Demonstrate competence)	Focused on own progression (Develop competence)
Avoids corrections and views them as criticism	Seek corrections for self-improvement
Creates intra rivalry among students	Encourage better interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging among students

Dance students learning in an ego-involving climate tend to see an inverse relationship between effort and ability. These students would usually be seen to participate in less challenging activities in order to sustain a degree of perceived competence by attaining success with little effort. On the other hand, students from a task-involving climate seek challenging activities and find ways to improve when they fall short of success<sup>13</sup>. That said, many private studios in Singapore are examinations and competition oriented and those events possess traits of an ego-involving climate. So how do we positively work around an ego-involving climate?

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## Preparing for examinations and competitions – why feedback when you can feedforward?



Nicholas Long

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Examinations and competitions tend to evaluate students based on an end result of practice, or against the abilities of others. This can push dancers to develop behaviours associated with the ego-involving climate. However, we can minimize that with task-involving methods such as recognising their personal progression, keeping them in mixed ability groups<sup>14</sup>, helping them understand that blunders are part of the learning process and let them feel like they are able to communicate their questions to you without feeling ashamed<sup>12,13,16</sup>.

The achievement goal theory has found that less evaluative and more supportive methods can nurture an intrinsic motivation<sup>15</sup> to learn. This in turn provides a platform for enhanced achievement strive among students<sup>16</sup>. Fostering awareness and problem solving skills can also empower dance students to take charge of their learning<sup>2</sup>. Using a constructive language in the studio encourages positive self-regulation in students as well<sup>17</sup>. Here are some examples:

- **"Does the music make you feel happy/sad/powerful/troubled? How can you express that in movements?"** (Hearing, feeling)
- **"Notice how you are able to roll faster on the ground when your knees are tucked?"** (detailed observation)
- **"Do you see how my arms transit from this position to the next?"** (Visual feedback)
- **"Where will you need to dance in order not to bump into your classmate?"** (Logic)
- **"How does the movement look when the my eye line changes?"** (Visual and Logic)

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A constructive feedback is considerate, task-specific and focuses on performance and away from an individual<sup>18</sup>. Feeding forward as seen in the examples above, helps the student understand the whats and whys of a correction without bringing about a negative psychological impact. It helps them view challenges as an chance to improve rather than a chance for failure. Let us reflect on the type of motivational climate we set for our students back at our studios and try a different approach when we work with them towards a performance, a competition, or the exams, and reap the benefits of an autonomous supportive environment. Make your classes the one your students look forward to, just like the one you did when you were young!



Currently a dance science and anatomy lecturer at the dance department, as well as a body conditioning, advance ballet and jazz at the musical theatre department of LASALLE College of The Arts. Charmaine also coaches competition group and elite programme at City Ballet Academy for local and international dance competitions. Charmaine is the first Singaporean to graduate with a MSc in Dance Science from Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in 2013.

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