



Syarifuddin Sahari, Dancer  
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**Reflecting on the impacts of mirrors in dance training**  
 Charmaine Tay, November 2021

For the longest time, dancers have used mirrors in training to provide them with visual feedback on their lines and movements, while dance teachers have used them to facilitate teaching. Having a mirror allows dancers to observe and learn dance movements from a teacher through multiple angles, increasing the accuracy of position matching. They also help dancers visualise the view of an audience during a performance. Despite mirrors being a crucial part of dance training, mirrors may also obstruct the proprioceptive experience of the dancer, thus impeding further growth of their technical abilities. Furthermore, mirrors have also contributed to the negative body-image of dancers. While mirrors remain a useful tool for dance teaching and learning, we also need to recognize its effects on dancers in the long run.

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## The use of mirrors in training

Mirrors have been beneficial to dancers in training; allowing them to correct their alignments, fine-tune shapes and height of their movements, as well as adjust the spacing between dancers in formation when doing group items. With the support of mirrors, dance teachers can demonstrate movement combinations in the same direction as students, making position-matching easier for students. Without it, teachers will have to face dance students directly and demonstrate mirrored combinations of the same movements, which may get confusing for both the teacher and student. On top of that, teachers can situate themselves easily to view many students at one go watching them through the mirror. Mirrors offer valuable assistance early in a dancer's training<sup>3</sup> for foundational visual imitation. However, over-reliance on the mirrors have also been found to hinder the development of a dancers' sense of proprioception<sup>1</sup> (a.k.a. knowing where your body is in relation to space).



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## From studio to stage

When dancers are heavily reliant on the mirrors, they tend to focus on external feedback from mirrors rather than indulge in the internalized sense of the movement through space, taking away the essence of artistry<sup>2</sup>; derived from awareness and self-expression, due to being overly self-conscious. As a skilled / professional dancer, the aesthetic of the movements may be less valuable as compared to how it feels.

When it comes to evaluating aesthetic qualities of dance, the sense of proprioception can help to enhance and produce the desired effect of the movement<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, performances, examinations and competitions are often held in front of an audience, without the aid of a mirror. Solely training dancers facing the mirror stifles the development of their proprioceptive and kinaesthetic sensory systems, inhibiting them from performing at their full potential<sup>5</sup>. Removing mirrors during training

helps dancers shift their attention to internal kinaesthetic feedback, which in turn, elevates the quality of performance. The focus shifts from technique to artistry where dancers can feel their movement rather than just see it from the mirror, enriching the experience of the performance.

Research has found that dancers commit to new movements and positions through muscle memory a lot faster when they are taught without the use of mirrors<sup>9</sup>. Although mirrors tend to be used more often in codified and traditional forms of dance, such as ballet, that places high value in lines and positions. Research has also found that beginning ballet students who learned and practiced an adagio (slow movement) phrase without the mirror developed stronger technical skills in their performance of the phrase than a comparable group of students who learned and practiced the same adagio phrase using a mirror<sup>6</sup>.

## Body-image problems

Mirrors can heighten the self-consciousness of a dancer, making them overly critical of the way they look<sup>4</sup>. A study looking at body-image concerns of dancers reported that the biggest stress point for dancers was the use of mirrors in the studio, followed by tight dance attires, desire to be thin and comparing their bodies to others<sup>7</sup>. Mirrors increase the tendency of dancers imagining how others may view them. This judgement made about their appearance of their bodies can lead to negative psychological effects on them, causing poor body-image, leading to disordered eating habits<sup>8</sup>. Dancers taught without the mirror were found to be less self-critical and reported higher levels of body satisfaction.



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## The pros and cons of using a mirror in training

Weighing the benefits and drawbacks of using a mirror in a dance training, how will you as a teacher decide what is best for the students? Perhaps the use of verbal imagery or somatic approaches can replace the need for a mirror, while emphasizing the long-term value of proprioception (position sense) and kinaesthetic (movement) feedback. As teachers, we need to understand the goals and needs of different student populations, to develop effective strategies to support these goals, rather than succumb to tradition.



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 provides private coaching for dancers from the Elite programme 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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