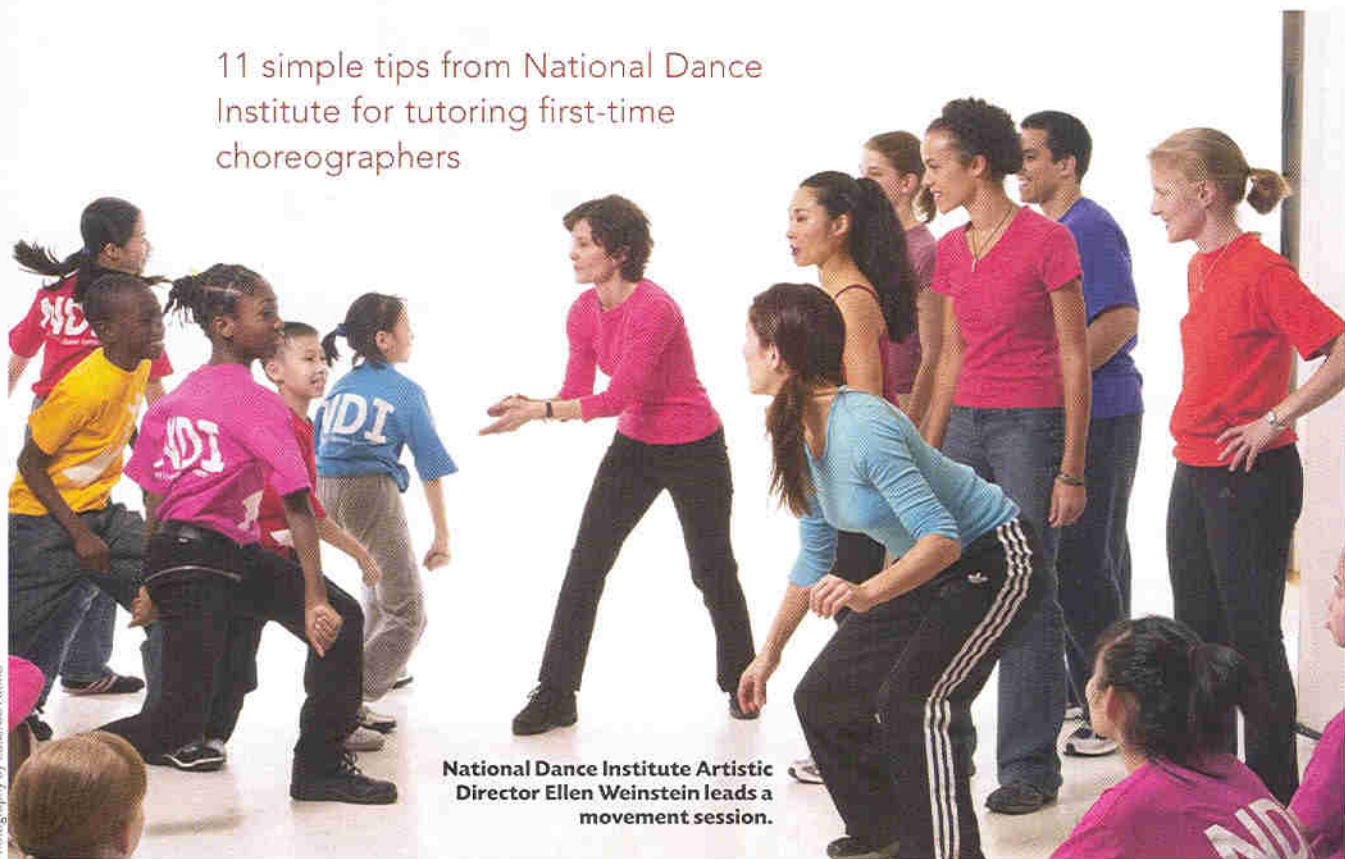


Choreo-Kids

11 simple tips from National Dance Institute for tutoring first-time choreographers



National Dance Institute Artistic Director Ellen Weinstein leads a movement session.

To the uninitiated, creating dances is as mysterious a process as writing a song or penning a novel. Even many experienced choreographers are flummoxed when it comes to explaining their method to others. But there are techniques for jump-starting the choreographic process, says Ellen Weinstein, artistic director of National Dance Institute—and they can be taught to students with great success.

Each year, NDI, the innovative program founded by former New York City Ballet dancer Jacques d'Amboise in 1976, works with thousands of New York City public school students. In addition to preparing students for a

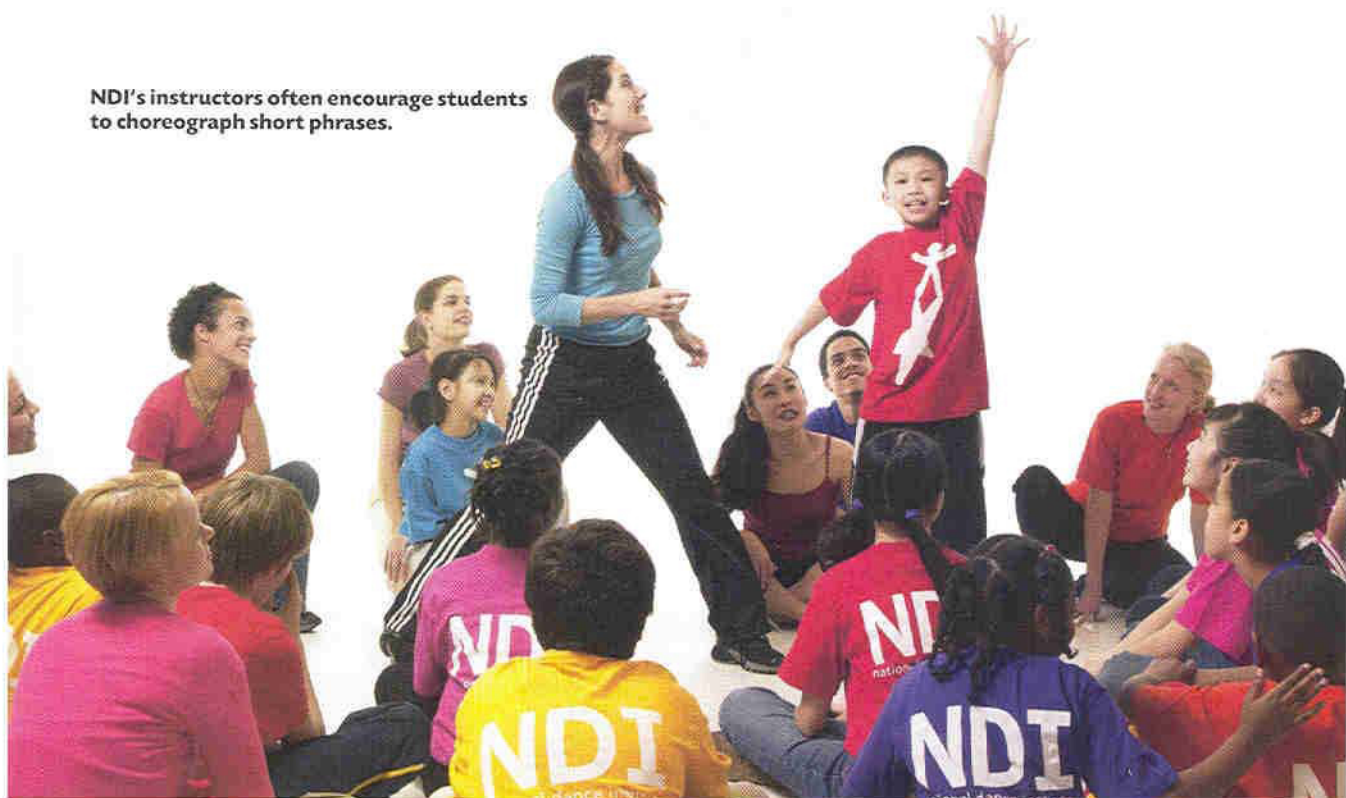
dance performance, NDI teachers frequently encourage their students to flex their creative muscles and come up with a few steps on their own. "It gives them such a sense of ownership," Weinstein says. "I love to watch our kids choreograph on each other. You see the leadership and sense of accomplishment—they are so proud, because it is their own work."

Dance teachers can tap into this positive creative outlet as well, by adding a choreography class to their weekly schedule, holding periodic choreography workshops or even by occasionally giving out simple assignments in a regular technique class. Here's Weinstein's advice for teaching choreography:

1. Take the pressure off with easy group exercises. To novices, the idea of choreographing can be intimidating. "There is the fear that you have to be incredibly creative," she says. Begin by letting the students pick a pose, then change it every four counts. That gets them moving and creating, Weinstein explains. "If the whole room is doing it together, they don't feel they will be singled out and laughed at," she says.

2. Have each student clap the syllables in his or her name, then make up a step to that rhythm. Put all of the steps in order—is a bridge needed between two steps? What should it be? Let the students come up with solutions on their

NDI's instructors often encourage students to choreograph short phrases.



own. Later, you can ask students to clap the rhythm of a whole phrase, then increase difficulty by having them think of steps that sound out that rhythm, but require that the sounds come from a part of the body other than the feet.

3. Give assignments with clear instructions. Ask students to make up an inventive entrance or exit, or a pas de deux in which the two dancers meet, then break apart. Limit them to four counts of eight. “Keep it very, very small. Asking them to choreograph an entire piece—that’s overwhelming,” Weinstein says.

4. Set limitations on steps or counts to encourage students to experiment with their entire movement vocabulary. Have students fill up four counts of eight in which they can only use one kick, one hop and one leap. Or have them break up two counts of eight into four counts

National Dance Institute's two-week teacher training program, scheduled for March 13–24 in New York City, will include a large segment on choreography and how to teach it. For more information, visit www.nationaldance.org.

“KEEP [CHOREOGRAPHY ASSIGNMENTS] VERY SMALL. ASKING [STUDENTS] TO CHOREOGRAPH AN ENTIRE PIECE—THAT’S OVERWHELMING. —ELLEN WEINSTEIN”

repeated three times with a single four-count on the end.

5. Create an opportunity for problem solving. For example, ask dancers to choreograph a small group dance in which students must remain touching the entire time—and holding hands doesn’t count. “This way, they are forced to come up with different things,” Weinstein says. “You get a very interesting mass of five heads and 10 feet.”

6. Specify ways to change familiar movements. Some students tend to cling to steps from last year’s recital dances. If so, make them present those steps in a different way. Have them do the move in a jump or in a canon, travel upstage or downstage, speed up or slow down the tempo, or take the first four counts and repeat them facing different directions.

7. Set the scene to change the character of a step. Tell students, “Now you’re little

mice in Einstein’s laboratory,” or “Now you are underwater,” Weinstein says.

8. Focus on the music. According to Weinstein, good choreographers use the score of a musical piece as a blueprint. While listening to the music, explain to students how an orchestra doesn’t always play the melody in unison. In the same way, interesting choreography is broken up with solos, duos and group movement.

While it is useful to have the students choreograph to music selected by the teacher, they may also love to choreograph to music of their own choice. Each approach has its benefits, Weinstein says. Another technique is having them choreograph to silence, using precise beats. Take a piece of choreography and try it over a different piece of music—how does the new music change its feeling?

9. Establish the framework. Have the students listen to the music, then ask

TEACHING How-To

them where they would have an entrance, where they would have an exit, where they would have a solo or group dance. Make sure the students are precise about counts, rather than allowing them to say, “the soloist should be center stage at around this part.”

10. Look at the big picture. Good choreography has focus—the audience always looks where the choreographer wants them to look. Have students think about what a dance is trying to say, and whether it achieves that goal. Remind them that simpler is better. If a step is good, repeat it. Don’t have unison dancing go on too long—change it up with a canon, or by call-and-response movement where one group starts the sequence and the other group is the echo.

11. Help students develop that all-important critical eye. Many choreographers learned how to create dances by studying good choreography, Weinstein says, adding that she honed her own skills by watching d’Amboise at work. If you cannot bring students to live performances, bring in videos with examples of good choreography and start up a discussion on why a certain part was interesting, or why the choreographer made a certain decision. Then let them sit back and critique each other’s work. Get them to say specifically why they liked it or not, or what could be changed to make the choreography stronger.

Whether they teach choreography or not, all dance teachers can recall an incident when, hot in the middle of trying to figure out a recital step that wasn’t working, a student piped up with, “Hey, I know what we can do! Why don’t we...?” Don’t ignore those opportunities, Weinstein says. Challenge such students by telling them to go home and work out four counts of eight. Then don’t forget to leave a few minutes at the beginning of the next class to watch it. “You might have to edit it, but see if you can work it into the choreography. It will make them feel special, to have that moment of their own in the piece,” she says. “Don’t be afraid to introduce choreography—students really embrace it and love it.” **DT**

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