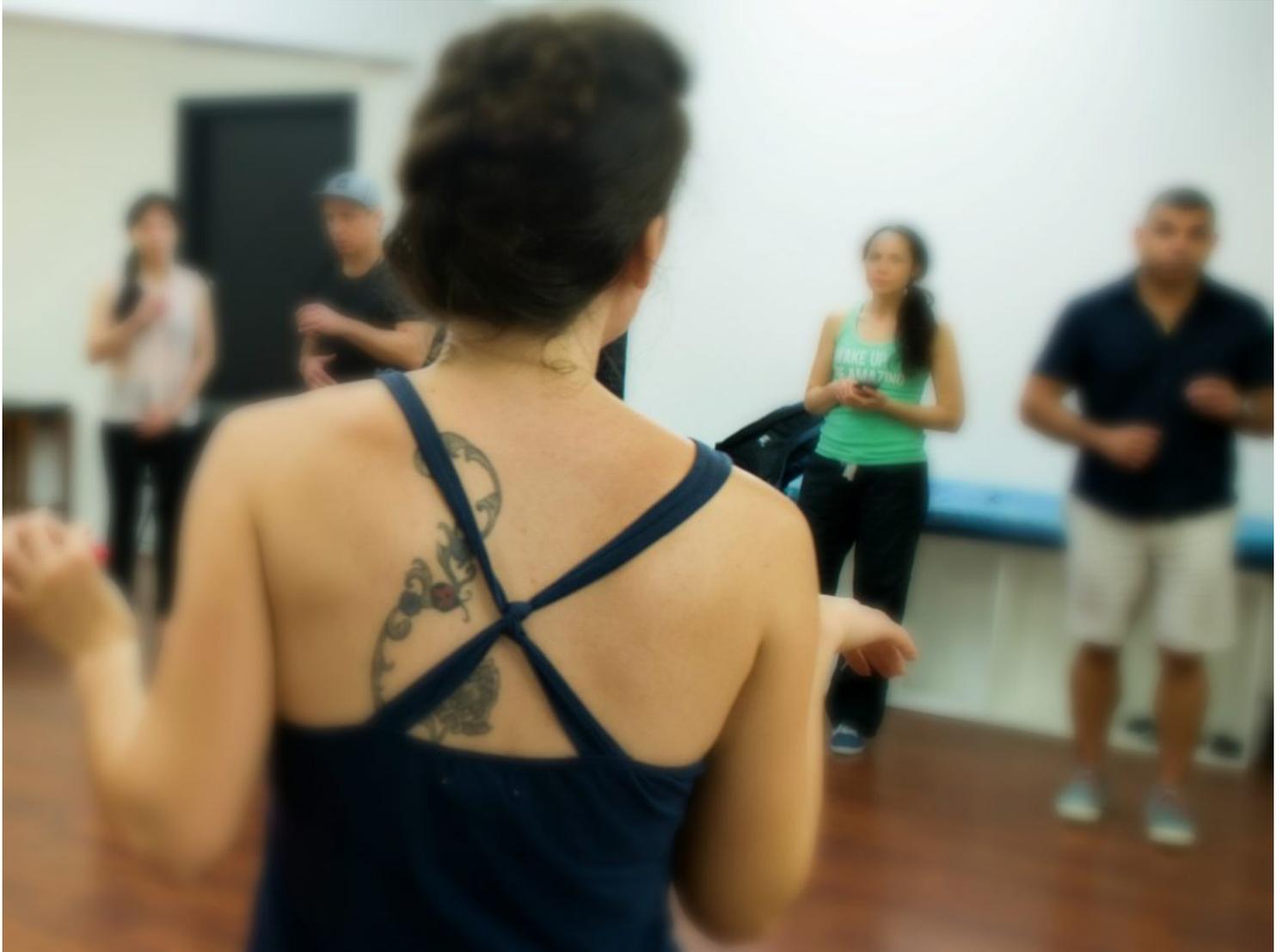


WHEN SHOULD DANCERS TRANSITION TO BEING TEACHERS?



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One of our readers submitted this question after witnessing a teacher handle a student's question in class quite ineptly.

I think that the more relevant question is WHY, not WHEN. There is no magic number of years you should dance before starting to teach. There is no competition you must win. There is no particular certification that should be acquired, unless you're in the ballroom dancing world. Far more important is the motivation you have for starting to teach. Let's take a look at several factors that might be involved in deciding whether to become a dance instructor.

Money

Let's just deal with this first. There have been a lot of messages out there recently about finding a way to do what you love as your job. After all, you spend a majority of waking hours working, so shouldn't it be something you enjoy? If you love dancing, maybe the solution could be to do it professionally!



Well, perhaps, but teaching people to dance is rarely very profitable. If you rely on that income for your living, the stakes become rather high. It affects the way you view your classes and how you feel about students who attend regularly or don't. You have to be an aggressive marketer and set up your classes to maximize profit. Most

communities can't support a dance teacher comfortably, which means either traveling a lot, moving to a big city, or teaching a huge range of dances. It will also land you right in the middle of dance scene politics, even if you don't start out wanting to compete with others.

Plus, while you may fool some newbies, people who have been in the scene longer can nearly always tell when you're motivated by money. And it's not viewed well. Sure, everybody has to eat, but we don't want to be your money bags.

Admiration

You love to be at the center of things. You want people to know you and respect you. You want them to see you and think "I want to dance like *(fill in your name)*"

There's actually nothing inherently wrong with feeling like this. We all long for affirmation in some way. However, this need for affirmation might be better fulfilled by focusing on performance. When you put on a show in the social dancing world, it is all about seeking the audience's attention, making them feel something with your movement. It doesn't even necessarily require that high a level to be able to learn

choreography and dance it with an energy that will grip people. At a higher level, you can train with a partner and create couple shows or videos for YouTube. You can even be the one to create choreography for a group of dancers – while this is often done by teachers, it is truly a separate skill, and well deserving acclaim.

But teaching to be admired? You're putting your sense of well-being into the hands of students. You will be up and down depending how many people loyally come to class and what they say about you. You will probably come across as egotistical or hungry, never mind the question of whether you are actually any good at teaching. You're almost certain to be the kind of teacher who can't admit when they're wrong or don't know how to explain something, dismissing



questions by saying “You just have to feel it” or even belittling your student for asking such a thing. This is one of the most infuriating wrongs I witness from teachers, and unfortunately it's not uncommon.

Demand

People love your dancing. They love dancing with you, and they love watching you dance. You have excellent balance, fluid movement, clean lines, flawless connection, and beautiful musicality...or at least you are well on your way. People ask you: “Aren't you a teacher?” “When are you going to start doing classes?” “I would love to take a private from you.”

That kind of approbation feels wonderful. It is certainly an indicator that if you want to teach, you could find support in your community. After all, everyone wants to learn from a skilled dancer. I would urge you to consider a few other questions, though: Do you want to teach? Do you know how to explain dancing to others? And does the scene need another teacher?

While being in demand is a good motivator, it shouldn't be the only reason you start teaching. Having a gregarious personality, being a fun social dancer, or impressing people with your movement quality are all assets for a teacher, but they don't actually add up to being a teacher.

Uniqueness

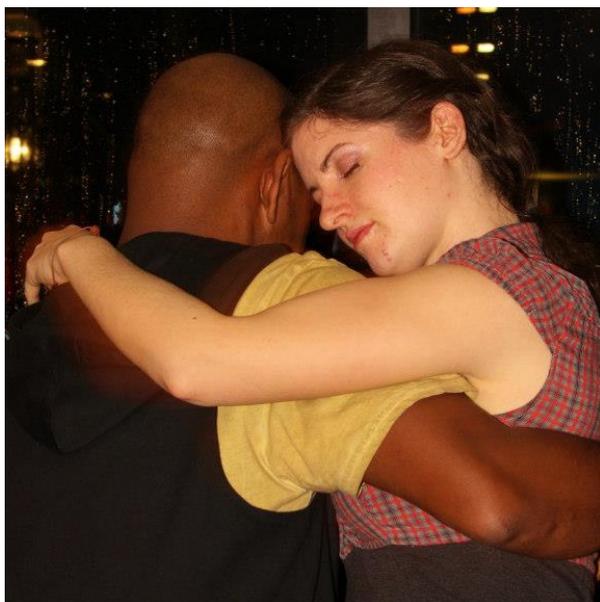
Maybe you are one of the first in your town to start dancing a particular dance style – kizomba, zouk, pachanga, whatever. People come up to you and say: “What is that?” “Can I try with you next time?” and pretty soon, “Would you teach us?”

Or perhaps you’ve been dancing a particular style for long enough to have developed your own special style. Something about the way you do your footwork, move through transitions, or put together moves impresses people. People ask you to teach them how to dance like you do.

If you want to share with others what you’ve developed, awesome! You have found your niche. So long as you can articulate where your style comes from and how others can achieve it, that individuality will be an incredible asset. It could even grow into a following!

That said, don’t feel obligated to help others recreate what you’ve crafted over time. Whether you don’t feel up to breaking things down, don’t want to invest the time in teaching, or simply prefer to stay one of a kind, others’ recognition of your uniqueness can’t be your sole motivating factor.

Partner



Whether it’s your romantic partner or your training partner, you’ve invested a lot in that relationship. When they ask you to teach with them, you can’t imagine refusing and having them ask someone else. Surely if they’re ready to teach, and they’ve asked you, you must be ready...right?

I think it’s important to consider in advance what your role is going to be. Is your partner going to be the teacher, with your role limited to

silent assistance? Will you circulate and offer feedback as students practice? Will you each teach your respective roles? Will you fully co-teach?

If you’re going to be an assistant, it’s enough for you to dance well – so long as your partner understands both sides of the dance. You can grow into more responsibilities with time and experience (that’s how I got started!) If you are going to be a teacher in your own right, though, you need to have more than just your partner as a

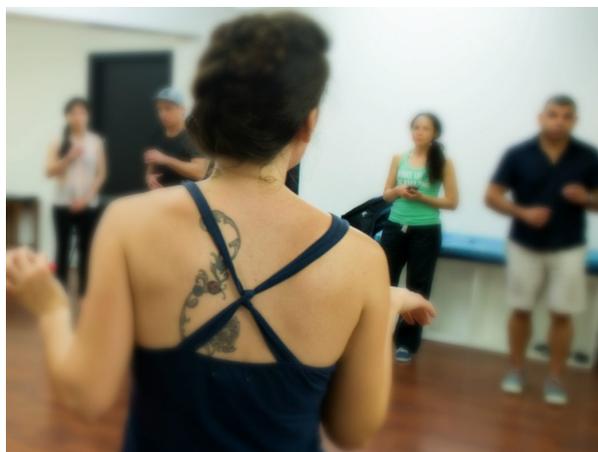
motivation. Otherwise, not only will it be a disservice to your students, it will be likely to strain your relationship as well.

Teaching Expertise

Some of you are just naturally good at explaining things. You see someone who's confused, and you quickly formulate a way to break down the concept so they can understand. Others of you have invested in quality teacher training, spending weeks, months, or years to develop your pedagogy.

Now let's be clear – just because you took a class called “instructor training” does not necessarily mean you have any teaching expertise. Some such courses are higher level dance classes with no actual work on pedagogy; others throw theory at you with no instruction about implementation; some are just plain mislabeled. If you're serious about becoming a great instructor, do the research to be sure that not only are you learning from awesome teachers, but that they will cover the various aspects of teaching.

Every dance instructor should have teaching expertise of some kind. Regardless of whether you have a piece of paper certifying it, you need to be able to help your students improve in understanding, technique, musicality, and so on. While some people can improve just by watching an excellent dancer, most students who come to class need a little bit more than that. The more you focus on making every lesson better than the last, taking time to reflect on what worked and what didn't, the more you hone your teaching ability.



Nevertheless, teaching expertise is more of an asset than a motivator. If it isn't accompanied by enthusiasm for the community and compassion for the learners, it'll be pretty dry. You must have a genuine desire to see your students improve, or why put in the time?

Passion

Maybe you live in a smallish town where social dancing is not a hugely popular activity. Or perhaps you dance one of the less widespread dances. You love dancing

and you want to be able to do more of it with more people. You are on fire with enthusiasm and you want to help your local community grow in this dance.

Thank goodness for people like you! Everyone who is happy with their dance community owes it to people who were passionate enough to invest huge amounts of effort and time into building up the scene.

There might not be anything more important for becoming a teacher than this passion to share your dance. This is what fuels you as you try to organize new dance opportunities, pulls new people into your orbit, and inspires others to join in your efforts.

And yet...we all know that person who is excitedly teaching the newbies crazy tricks and dips that are endangering everyone on the floor. The urge to share your enthusiasm, while incredibly important, doesn't cover all faults.

Conclusion

In the end, you need a combination of these factors before you can confidently take the step to becoming a teacher. You're a skilled dancer, or at least enough better than the majority that people admire your dancing. You have demand for lessons, or you're interested in building up your scene. You have teaching expertise, or else there's a lack of teachers in your area and you intend to start with what you know and work hard to hone your abilities as an instructor. You care about seeing other dancers improve, and you want to invest time and energy in helping them do so.

There's no single formula that yields the correct time for someone to transition to being a teacher. If you aren't sure, try teaching without calling yourself a teacher. Run a practice session and share what you know. One thing is for certain: even when you do become a teacher, you should never stop being a student. There is always more to learn – and I'm glad of it!

Featured image courtesy of [Benoy Varghese](#)

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