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Learning to dance

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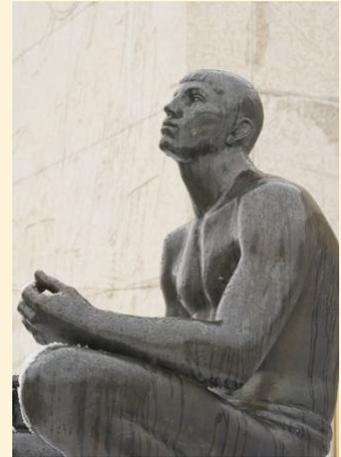
Skye Playsted



Learning to Dance

“Thank you so much for your interest in us and your respect for all.”

Of all the sweet, heartfelt messages my students had written me on our final day of class together, this one, written by Lila² and her phone translation app, really took my breath away. Lila was very shy and rarely spoke out in class. Like most of the young adult women in my class of beginner, refugee-background learners, she'd only had a few years of formal schooling prior to coming to Australia. And like all the students in the class, she had been through deeply traumatizing experiences due to war and forced displacement from her beloved homeland. As much as providing her with English language skills, the government-funded English classes she was able to attend each day provided her with a safe, caring, predictable environment to help her settle and prepare for life in Australia. I was Lila's English teacher, but I didn't realize till I read her message that I had been teaching her something more important than new words. And she probably didn't realize that her message taught me as much as I had taught her.



Lila's message showed me something important that day: that relationships are powerful teachers in the classroom. My students were learning from me as a person, much more than from my words or lesson plans as a teacher. For that young woman in my class, something about my manner and my behavior had begun to show her that, while the respect and genuine interest of others may not have been part of her trauma-affected past, they could be part of her future.

The students in my class were in the very beginning stages of learning English, so we had little shared language to rely on in our classroom interactions. Although I made an effort to listen to students

² Students' names are pseudonyms.

carefully and allowed each one the time and space they needed to write or say something in English, I found that I also needed to think of other ways to communicate and connect with them. One of these ways was through learning their cultural dances in lunch breaks. Yes—I danced in front of my students. Dancing and song were deeply valued in my students’ cultural heritage. Having my preliterate students with limited English vocabulary act as teachers and help me learn different dance steps was a wonderful confidence and relationship builder.

I have never felt confident dancing, and I genuinely wanted to get better at it. At first, I felt embarrassed because I didn’t know what to do, and *I* found it so difficult when *they* made the dances look so easy. But my students, especially Lila, would take me aside from the rest of the group, slow down the steps and count slowly in English so that I could get it. Lila patiently repeated steps over and over with me till I was able to participate in the group dance. We all laughed at my mistakes, but I did gradually improve in some of the simpler dances (similar to this [one](#)).



“How is that relevant to English teaching?” I hear you ask. At first, my motives were purely selfish, I must admit. I just wanted to learn how to dance. But one day a

student said to me “You not know Kurdish dancing—difficult. Same me English.” She had connected her own language learning process to my process of learning to dance!

“ **People engage in brain-altering learning when they are face-to-face, mind-to-mind, and heart-to-heart.** ”

Do relationships really change how we learn? Yes. Psychological research into adult learning has found that “people...engage more effectively in brain-altering learning when they are face-to-face, mind-to-mind, and heart-to-heart” (Cozolino & Sprokay, 2006, p. 12). The same principles of therapy which enhance neural plasticity are also at work in the classroom. When our thinking as well as our feelings are activated, when we are motivated to learn and when we have “a safe and

trusting relationship with an attuned other” (Cozolino & Sprokay, 2006, p. 12), the neural circuitry in our brains is activated and we are able to learn more easily. So, learning to dance with my students was building our relationships, and teaching us to learn from each other at the same time. “[Kids] don't remember what you try to teach them. They remember what you are” (Henson [creator of the Muppets], 2011).

Skye Playsted has taught in schools, vocational colleges, and in a university Academic English program in Australia. She loves to work with students from refugee backgrounds, and is particularly interested in working with preliterate adults who are learning English for the first time. She completed her M. Ed. (TESOL) through the University of Wollongong in Australia. Web: skyeplaystedtesol.wordpress.com

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Neuroscientist Uri Hasson shows how our brains become “aligned” while listening to stories. Click [here](#).

