

Bharatanatyam

Dancing for the Gods

GRADE 6-8

Introduction

Age Group: 10-14 (US Grades: 6-8)

Welcome

Students at this stage of their lives are testing their relationship to the world, both in terms of challenging the status quo and developing a self-identity with which they feel comfortable. They are increasingly concerned with meaning and truth, both personal and social, and are beginning to think in more abstract ways and to speculate about origins and outcomes.

The turbulent emotions and rapid physical changes of this age group present both challenges and opportunities for the growth of skills and expression in dance. Students are capable of focused work in various techniques and styles of dance, and enjoy the “safe space” that a structured and defined physical challenge provides. They can investigate and apply complex processes to movement invention and execution. Sharing their original creative dance work in small groups can be a productive solution for the shyness that often accompanies this period. Consistent dance study develops the following skills and understandings:

- **Physical:** Further refinement of movements, building strength in various dance techniques, and coordinating spatially and rhythmically complex sequences.
- **Social/affective:** Overcoming awkwardness, building trust among peers, working independently and taking risks.
- **Cognitive:** Distinguishing, manipulating, synthesizing, analyzing, evaluating and creating dance.
- **Aesthetic:** Accurately executing different styles of dance, considering multiple factors leading to aesthetic effect.
- **Metacognitive:** Reflecting on their own qualities as dancers in relation to their training and world dance styles.

Instructional Time

Students who choose a dance elective in middle school should take an equivalent of three to five dance classes per week. Dance technique involves a process of carefully and specifically warming up the muscles in order to enable them to execute increasingly challenging shaped movements. As it takes time to prepare the body for these demands, the most effective arrangement is to schedule double periods for dance technique classes whenever possible, reserving the single periods for improvisation/composition or dance history.

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Activity area 1: **Dance Making**

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SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

Task: Eye movement

Go to [Eyes](#) (path: Basic Technique / Head, Eyes & Neck / Eyes) and choose an eye movement. Show the demonstration video to your students, then invite them to try the movement for themselves. Make sure they are careful to observe range of motion (the full distance that the eyeball travels). Does the entire head move also or is it only an eye motion? You can go through the same exercise with the other movements in the [Head, Eyes & Neck](#) section.

Task: Rhythm and sound

In this task we encourage students to listen to rhythmic structure. First, show the video called [Talking Feet](#) (path: Introduction / Talking Feet), encouraging your students to listen out for different rhythmic patterns (three beat 'triplets' / four beats etc.) If necessary play the video through a number of times.

Having asked your students to identify rhythm, now play the video again asking them to identify the different types of sound made by the dancer's feet. Can they listen out for 'flat' sounds made by the entire soles of the feet, and the 'booming' (more 'bass') sound made by the heel as it drops to the floor?

[\[Skills and Techniques continues on next page\]](#)

IMPROVISATION

Task: Rhythm and eyes

Now your students should add rhythm to the eye movements chosen from [Skills and Techniques](#) (see previous activity, [Skills and Techniques](#)). They can try a three-beat (triplet) rhythm or a five-beat (two-plus-three) beat pattern.

As you provide a beat for your students you should start with a slow regular tempo. Once your students are used to the tempo, you can start to 'shuffle it' – varying quicker and slower speeds, as well as (for more advanced students) trying a variety of rhythmic patterns. After the exercise, ask your students how they felt challenged by the changes. Were faster speeds more difficult than slower ones or vice versa?

Task: Rhythm and phrase

Find the demonstration video of Naatu adavu (path: Body Combinations / Pure Movement / [Naatu adavu](#)). Play the video (multiple times if necessary) asking your students to pay close attention to the relationship between the dancer's movement and the spoken syllables. Can your students identify the regular rhythm over the eight bars of this phrase?

[\[Improvisation continues on next page\]](#)

CHOREOGRAPHY

Task: Applying gesture

Go to either [Single-hand gestures](#) (path: Basic Technique / Hand Gestures / Single-hand or Double-hand gestures) or [Double-hand gestures](#) (path: Basic Technique / Hand Gestures / Single-hand or Double-hand gestures). Select a gesture, then show the demonstration video, paying close attention to the application of the gesture towards the end of the video. Ask your students to describe how the facial expression of the dancer helps to project the application of the hand gesture.

Now your students should think of an everyday action that involves a hand gesture (e.g. hailing a taxi, greeting an old friend, calling for the ball in a soccer game).

They should now select a hand gesture and an eye movement (seen earlier). They should put these two gestures together to perform the everyday action that they've selected.

Task: Create an incident

The challenge now is to combine the above gestures with the improvised (adapted) Naatu adavu sequence (from previous activity, [Improvisation](#)). To do this, ask your students to think of an incident that incorporates the everyday gesture they have selected.

What kind of story does this challenge create?

[\[Choreography continues on next page\]](#)

PERFORMANCE

Task: Creating a short performance

The task now is for each pair to expand the choreographed sequence (from previous activity, [Choreography](#)) into a short performance.

The performance will have three principal components:

- An entrance
- The main story
- An exit

Space is very important here. How can the students use the available performance space? Which part of the story needs to be in one place while another needs to travel? Is the story showing a larger area or a small location?

If you have access to music CDs, suggest to the students that they can choose a soundscape for the piece. (You should also make clear that silence is a viable option too!) As the students work, discuss with them how their selection of soundscape affects the performance and use of gestures.

The audience is very important element of this exercise. Encourage the students to think about how the audience helps to 'create the space'. Should they sit in a circle around the performance space? Or simply sit in chairs in a traditional 'classroom' arrangement? Should the audience be involved directly (e.g. the pair invites an audience member up on 'stage' with them?)

[\[Performance continues on next page\]](#)

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SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

[continued]

Having gone through this process, the students should try some stamping for themselves (note: this will need to be done in bare feet with no socks). Can your students make different types of sounds with different parts of their feet? Can they make the 'flat' sound with the sole, or the 'booming' sound with the heel?

IMPROVISATION

[continued]

Now show your students the **Movement analysis** video. Ask the students to try the sequence for themselves, referring to (and replaying) the video if necessary.

Once they feel comfortable with the Naatu adavu, ask the students to perform the same Naatu adavu sequence to another rhythm – perhaps a triplet.

Once the students have improvised their adaptations, invite them to present to the class in turn. Ask each student about the challenges s/he faced with the new beat structure. Did s/he have to make major adaptations? Did s/he slow down the movement or speed it up (and possibly repeat it)?

Discuss challenges and solutions with the class.

Note: there is no 'right way' to do this – each student will improvise, using Naatu adavu as a starting point.

CHOREOGRAPHY

[continued]

Give your students the freedom to split the adavu into parts (they do not need to incorporate all the movements from the adavu in sequence). Shorter movements from the adavu can be interspersed with the gesture to create the narrative.

After this exercise, ask your students to divide into pairs. One is the 'observer' while the other is the 'performer'. They then will exchange roles. Discuss with each pair what they observed in each other's performance, and the challenges they encountered as a performer.

PERFORMANCE

[continued]

After each pair has presented their performance, discuss the choices that were made. Draw attention in particular to three elements:

- **Principal components** (entrance / story / exit)
- **Use of space**
- **Use of audience**

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Activity area 2: **Dance Literacy**

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UNDERSTANDING DANCE

With the course projected on a large screen (or interactive whiteboard) select the **Course Map** icon (small icon on right bottom corner of screen). Choose **Misram Jati** (path: Body Combinations / Jati / Misram). Show the demonstration video and then the **Movement analysis** video.

Building on the experiences the students had in Activity area 1 (where they improvised movement to various rhythmic patterns) discuss with them their observations on this more complex movement sequence.

In particular, what do they notice about the variations in speed of the movement, or the changing rhythms of the performer's feet? How do these elements affect the 'feel' of the performance?

APPLYING VOCABULARY

Ask your students to divide into pairs. Each student is assigned a letter (A or B). As teacher, you now assign two gestures (one single-hand, one double-hand) to each student - two for As, two for Bs (path: Basic Technique / Hand Gestures). Show the chosen videos (four in total) to the class.

The task for the students is to find three ways to greet each other using their assigned gestures. The nature of the greeting should vary (friendly / angry / sad / fearful etc).

ANALYZING MOVEMENT

Go to the section called Head (path: Basic Technique / Head, Eyes & Neck / Head). Show the introduction video that can be accessed from the text below the photograph.

Divide the students into small groups (four or five). Assign each group a simple sentence (such as the one related by the voiceover of the video) and ask them to collaborate on expressing the meaning of the sentence with their heads (note: this activity involves using everyday head movements – not Bharatanatyam movements at this stage).

Replay the video, and ask each group to analyse whether any of the head movements they used came close to the Bharatanatyam head movements used in the video.

COMPARING DANCE STYLES

For this exercise, make a selection of DVDs showing dance styles (three or four) from different cultures (e.g. a Japanese style or Thai or even ballet). Select a small section of each dance style to show to the class.

Now identify some sections of the **Varnam** performance from Dancing for the Gods (this can be accessed via the Course Map). To begin with, choose some of the sections that have a narrative element, such as the first or second line of poem (you can use the slider at the top of the screen to identify and access these sections).

As you show these segments of the Varnam to the class, ask your students to focus on specific aspects in turn – use of feet, eyes, hands, costume, music etc.

After you have shown the videos, discuss with your students the contrasts – and similarities – between the performance styles. Ask the students to choose one movement that they remembered from each of the video segments they have seen. Give them time and space to try out each of the movements. This will help your students to fully engage – intellectually and physically – with differences in style.

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Activity area 3: **Making Connections**

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HISTORY AND CULTURE

To prepare for this session, find some top-level information on the history of different dance forms from around the world (ballet / tango / hip-hop etc). Then go to [Origins of Bharatanatyam](#) (path: Introduction / Origins) and play the video to the class [5 minutes approx.]

After the video, initiate a discussion on the history of dance across the world – and how different styles have influenced each other. In the Origins of Bharatanatyam video, we see how Anna Pavlova influenced the history of Indian dance. What other examples of cross-cultural influence can your group uncover?

CONNECTING WITH OTHER ARTS

Ask your students each to choose a sculpture, painting or photograph that inspires them to tell a story. Ask them to present their selected artwork and describe the story it suggests to them.

Each student should now choose a number of gestures and movements (minimum 3) from [Basic Technique](#). In this phase of the exercise, the students can use their chosen movements as tools to express the story that has been inspired by the work of art.

Remind your students that this is a non-verbal task. They need to try to express the story through movement.

After each presentation, initiate a discussion with the group to analyze the storytelling. Invite each student to discuss the challenges of expressing the story through a limited range of movements from an unfamiliar culture, without the use of spoken text.

USING TECHNOLOGY

Using an LCD projector connected to your PC or Mac (or interactive whiteboard) the games and tasks contained within [Dancing for the Gods](#) can become activities for students both individually and as a group.

In particular, the exercise called [Nritya & Naatya](#) (path: Body Combinations / Emotional Power / Saatvika abhinaya) and the Direct a Drama! section offer engaging tasks to help build characters and dances.

Also see the [Fun & Games](#) section to see how technology can be used as a creative tool.

Go to the Course Map and look for the [Now you Try!](#) webcam icon next to each of the movements in Basic Technique (as well as the [Nataraja](#) page, where the same feature is called Compose your Pose).

In this innovative exercise, students can record themselves following the motions from a demonstration video (note: a high-bandwidth Internet connection is required for the webcam to function).

You can have fun with this feature. Experiment with setting up the webcam in the classroom, in front of a performance space where students can practice the movements 'on camera' and then compare their results against the demonstration video.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Using video excerpts from a number of different dance performances, ask your students to closely observe the dancers' posture and use of breath. Discuss with the class the use of the 'core'. (The core is located roughly a hand's breadth below the navel)

Now open the page called [Some Key Terms](#) (path: Basic Technique / Some Key Terms). This page has a number of sub-sections that examine the importance of posture, breath, levels, verticality etc. These concepts are important to understand both for elegant expression and the avoidance of injury. In particular, draw your students' attention to the sub-sections called Get Vertical! and Breathe!

Now ask your students to divide into pairs. Each member of the pair should perform the Adavu (learned in Activity 1, [Skills and Technique](#)). As they perform, their partner should closely observe and provide feedback on body posture and breathing. In particular, the observing partner should pay attention to potential over-arching or the distribution of weight in the wrong areas of the body.

Remind your students of the importance of observation, playing a critical role in helping fellow dancers to avoid injury.

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Activity area 4: **Community and Cultural Resources**

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ENGAGING WITH INSTITUTIONS

Find out the location of an Indian dance studio or a Hindu temple near to your community. Many temples offer classes and performances in Indian dance and music. Ask if your students can observe or even participate in a community class.

Before the field trip, show the video called [Origins of Bharatanatyam](#) (path: Introduction / Origins). You can also show the sequence called What are you saying? (path: Basic Technique / Some Key Terms / What are you saying?). Both these sequences place Bharatanatyam in a historical and contemporary cultural context, which will be good preparation for a trip to the temple.

A local museum or library may be offering exhibitions of Indian art. They often have visiting artists who give demonstrations, workshops and performances. Seeing a live dancer is one of the best ways to enhance our deeper understanding of the culture and its dance.

USING RESEARCH RESOURCES

Encourage your students to look for books in the school or local public library that go deeper into the background of Indian art. Suggest that they select one particular aspect of the course and find external material related to it. The **Nataraja** section may be a good starting point (path: Body Combinations / Emotional Power / Aangika abhinaya / The Nataraja).

On the Internet there are many sites dedicated to Indian classical dance: www.narthaki.com is a good example as are: www.kadam.org.uk/pulse.php and www.sruti.com. It is always worth looking at arts programming offered by local TV stations. Some more national and international sites offering access to a range of arts programming are the BBC (www.bbc.co.uk) and PBS (www.pbs.org).

Many fine examples of different dance forms and performers are available on the video sharing site YouTube (www.youtube.com)

In addition, your local Indian Association can easily be traced through the Internet or just asking around. These associations will be happy to provide information on touring shows, workshops, exhibitions and any other cultural activities that are due to take place in your area.

There are periodicals and publications to South Asian dance. The UK magazine Pulse is a good example, as is the newspaper India Abroad (www.indiaabroad.com)

SHARING BETWEEN SCHOOLS

Ask your students if they have a friend outside of class who is learning Indian dance. You could invite this person to share a workshop at your school.

Alternatively, if there is an interesting artist in the community, or a touring artist or group is visiting your area, you could initiate a shared workshop with a neighboring school. This can be a powerful interaction for your students as, through the workshop, they get to meet and make friends with other students who have been learning about the arts. What experiences can they share? What can they learn from each other's approach?

You may feel ready to mount a 'partner school' dance drama featuring some elements of Bharatanatyam. You could take one of the Myths & Stories in the **Nataraja** section (path: Body Combinations/Emotional Power / Aangika abhinaya / Nataraja) and assign each of your students a 'buddy' from the partner school. Encourage your students to exchange ideas with their buddies. Together, they can develop the theme and story before coming together for rehearsals in a live setting.

Joint activities of this type provide excellent opportunities for building powerful life-skills such as teamwork and leadership.