

100 Years of Dance

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Why might people dance, and how have dance trends changed in America since the 1920s?

OVERVIEW

Imagine the scene: You are at an event with a friends. “The music isn’t bad,” you think, tapping your foot and swaying along with the beat. But then, as the opening refrain of a song you love comes through the speakers, you head excitedly toward the dance floor. Forgetting for a moment what anyone else might think, you lose yourself to the music, moving to the beat with style and grace. For some reason, it feels natural. And quite good.



Photo: Library of Virginia

This is no accident. Music and dance are, in some ways, hardwired into our biological systems. As Columbia University neurologist John Krakauer suggests in a recent *Scientific American* article, dance is pleasurable because, “people speculate that music was created through rhythmic movement—think: tapping your foot.” That is to say, on some level music was created because of dance. Krakauer continues, “some reward-related areas in the brain are connected with motor areas ... [and] mounting evidence suggests that we are sensitive and attuned to the movements of others’ bodies, because similar brain regions are activated when certain movements are both made and observed.” In other words, when we move in rhythm and when we share that experience with others, there may be a tangible payoff: happiness.

People have been dancing for millennia, but the proliferation of recorded media during the 20th century led to what today we might call the “viral” spread of specific dance trends. For instance, 1920s “Jazz Age” dance trends such as the Charleston and Jitterbug are at once both collections of bodily movements and powerful symbols of the evolving modern culture and personal freedoms of the moment. During the Swing Era of the 1930s and 1940s dance trends such as the Lindy Hop demonstrated Caucasian-American’s ongoing assimilation of African-American culture. In the 1950s and early 1960s both Cuban-originated dance trends such as the Mambo and decidedly North American dance trends such as Chubby Checker’s “The Twist” were popular, and, on TV, dance shows like *American Bandstand* and *Hullabaloo* launched countless new songs and dance trends directed toward a massive, postwar teenage audience. Cue Disco, break dancing, slam dancing, the Macarena, the Dutty Wine, Dame tu Cosita, flossing, and several hundred others. In the era of YouTube and social media, new dance trends seem to spring forth in a heartbeat, inspired by anything from a celebrity Tweet to a video game.

Yet, while one who danced the Charleston during the Jazz Age might be baffled by the concept of a dancing Player547 in Fortnite, would she recognize the moves nonetheless? Overall, how much has the practice of dancing--the way we move our bodies in time--changed throughout the decades, if at all?

In this lesson, students investigate these questions by analyzing videos of dance trends the decades. With the help of a worksheet, student groups watch footage of the Charleston and Lindy Hop, the Mambo, “Love-in” dancing, Disco, and Break Dancing. Based on their informed observation of these styles, they then debate whether dance has “evolved” in American culture, or remained mostly the same.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The connection between music and dance
- Ways to analyze and describe different dance types
- American dance styles of the 1920s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s
- Scientific theories of why people enjoy dancing

- Students will be able to debate scientific theories of dance, and whether popular dance in America has changed, by reading articles and analyzing historical footage.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Use a whiparound to ask students in the class to name their favorite musical artist or genre of music, writing their answers on the board. Then, choose a few selections from the list and ask:
 - Would you dance to this music? Why or why not?
 - Do you think other people might enjoy dancing to this music? Why?
 - How might you dance to this music? Would you create your own dance moves, or emulate dance moves you’ve seen other people do?
 - Where do you see the dance moves you like most?
 - Do you think 50 years ago, people danced to music the same way you do? What about 100 years ago? If not, what might have changed?

PROCEDURE

1. Play **Clip 1, Soundbreaking – The Beat Throughout American Popular Music History**.

Ask students:

- According to the people in the clip, what is it about music that makes people want to dance?
 - What about music do you think might make people want to dance?
2. Tell students that they will be investigating whether different types of music make people dance in different ways by looking at the history of American dance trends. Set up the following five viewing stations in the classroom:

- **Group 1 - Dance in the 1920s**
- **Group 2 - 1950s Mambo Dancing**
- **Group 3 - 1960s “Love In” Dancing**

- **Group 4 - 1970s Disco Dancing**
- **Group 5 - 1980s Break Dancing**

3. Break the class into 5 groups and distribute **Handout 2 - Dance Movement Notes** to each group. Assign each group to a station at which they will view the video and use the cues on their handout to take notes on how the dancers are moving their body. Show **Image 1, Handout 2 Example** to help students think about how they could describe the dancing. Then, have a representative of each group to tell the class about the dance moves they discovered, and how they related to the music in the clip. Encourage students to demonstrate the dance moves as well. Have students switch stations as many times as class length permits.
4. While still in groups, have students choreograph their own dance trends based on some of the moves they saw while watching the videos. Then have student groups perform their unique dance.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:
 - Did the different groups present different dance moves, or were they all similar?
 - Based on what the groups presented, do you think dance has changed over the decades? How so?
 - Are there similarities you see in dancing throughout the decades?
 - Do you think changes in music had an effect in how dance trends have changed? Can you provide an example based on the videos you watched?
 - Can you think of a dance that is popular right now? What are some of the moves? Are they similar to dance moves you saw in the videos?
 - Do you think dance moves change as music changes? Or do you think dance moves stay mostly the same even when the music changes?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Play **Clip 2, Ewe Atsiagbekor Dance (Southeastern Ghana)**, and explain to students that this is a traditional dance of the Ewe (“Ay-way”) people of West Africa. Ask students:
 - What are some of the differences you notice between this style of dancing and the American style of dancing you observed? Are there similarities?
 - Why might there be similarities between this African style of dance and the dancing styles in the United States?
2. Pass out **Handout 1 - Neurologist John Krakauer on Why We Dance**. Tell students that they will be reading about a scientific theory of why we enjoy dancing and watching other people dance. Read the handout aloud as a class, working through any vocabulary that is unfamiliar to students. Then ask students:
 - How does Krakauer begin his article? What is the first paragraph saying?
 - In what paragraph does Krakauer give his scientific opinion on dance? (*The fourth paragraph, beginning with “First, people speculate. . .”*)
 - What is he saying in this paragraph?
 - What is a “mirror neuron?” Can you explain what a mirror neuron does in your own words?
 - Looking at the vocabulary Krakauer uses, would you say he is talking about scientific fact or a scientific theory? (*If necessary, point students to moments when Krakauer writes, “Scientists aren’t sure,” “people speculate,” “evidence suggests,” “a great deal of speculation.”*)
 - If there is a biological basis why people dance, do you think there is also a biological basis to how a person dances? Do you think different types of music biologically provoke people to dance in different ways?

STANDARDS

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

Creating

Anchor Standard #1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard #2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard #3: Refine and complete artistic work.

Performing/Presenting/Producing

Anchor Standard #4: Select, analyze and interpret artistic work for presentation

Anchor Standard #5: Develop and refine artistic technique and work for presentation.

Anchor Standard #6: Convey meaning through the presentation of work.

Responding

Anchor Standard #7: Perceive and analyze artistic.

Anchor Standard #8: Interpret intent and meaning artistic work.

Anchor Standard #9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Connecting

Anchor Standard #10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experience to art.

Anchor Standard #11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understand.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- PBS *Soundbreaking* - The Beat Throughout American Popular Music History
- Dance in the 1920s
- 1950s Mambo Dancing
- 1960s “Love In” Dancing
- 1970s Disco Dancing
- 1980s Break Dancing

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Neurologist John Krakauer on Why We Dance
- Handout 2 - Dance Movement Notes