

# **The Aerial Teacher's Handbook**

**A Guide for Instructors in Aerial Circus Arts, Fitness, and Dance**

**JULIANNA HANE**



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## Disclaimer

This manual is intended to accompany a live teacher training program led by a qualified instructor with extensive experience in the industry and an excellent safety record. It is not intended to teach aerial arts to the layperson. Any use or misuse of this manual is done strictly **AT YOUR OWN RISK**. By using this manual, you are waiving all rights and assume all risks associated with applying the activities and information in this book.

Risks of aerial training include stroke, heart attack, dizziness, sprains, breaks, bruises, paralysis, and even death. Aerial work can be especially dangerous for people with certain medical conditions, so check with your health-care provider before beginning any exercise regimen. If you experience dizziness, stop training immediately.

Be smart, and stay safe. Always seek instruction from a live experienced instructor, rig only from load-tested equipment installed by a professional aerial rigger, and use this book as a reference only.

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# Preface

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## Welcome

Aerial arts have quickly gained popularity in recreation settings across the world. While resources on aerial skills and tricks exist, there is little information published on the actual practice of teaching in the aerial arts. I personally have compiled a library of books on teaching dance and other movement practices such as yoga to support my aerial teaching. Because researching specifics, such as the history of the form, leads down a rabbit hole of scattered information that is often out of context, I wanted to create a more comprehensive resource for aerial teachers. Researching and writing this text has been such a rewarding experience because I have learned so much in the process. It was certainly a labor of love, as I had to rewrite the book twice due to a few major data losses! I hope that both the new and experienced aerial teacher will find it useful.

## My Background

My first aerial experience was in 2001 at Winthrop University, where I was cast in a rope and harness piece. At that time aerial training was hard to come by, so I took workshops at Nimble Arts (now New England Center for Circus Arts or NECCA), Circus Center in San Francisco, and the Aerial Dance Festival. Years later I returned to NECCA for their Professional Training Program. When I graduated from college, I became a dance teaching artist for the North Carolina Dance Theatre. This experience put me in several K–5 schools, teaching short-term dance residencies of 4–10 lessons each. My goal was to introduce dance to those who had never before experienced it, in hopes that kids who were untrained in dance could find the joy in expressive movement. At the same time, I was also teaching in an elite preprofessional dance program.

Later I became certified to teach yoga in the studio setting and dance in the K–12 setting. Founding Revolve Aerial Dance, a recreational school and performing company, allowed me to pursue my passion of teaching aerial dance and managing a studio. In addition to attending graduate school, serving on college dance faculty, and conducting aerial dance residencies, I also acquired a certification in Laban Movement Analysis. I currently present my aerial dance research at national conferences to promote and expand the form in higher education.

## Purpose

This book focuses on *pedagogy*, or the theory and practice of teaching. It does not contain information on how to teach skills or tricks, but gives you all the other details involved in teaching, such as class planning, understanding student needs, developing a curriculum, and growing as a professional. Through my different certification experiences, I am aware of a gap between theory and practice. My goal is to help bridge that gap so aerial teachers can actually use the information in the studio. While I have attempted to be inclusive, the thoughts and ideas presented here reflect my personal experience, my cultural background, and interviews with other coaches. The focus is primarily on rec

# Part I: Awareness

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**“To thine own self be true...” ~ William Shakespeare**

# Chapter 1

## Why Teach? Knowing Yourself

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What/who inspired you to take on this challenging art form? What/who kept you going?

### It Starts with Passion...

Understanding why you teach is one of the most important things you could know about yourself. Your purpose is what drives and inspires you. It keeps you going when the going gets tough, and it definitely will be tough at times! Instead of starting with the obvious question, “Why do you teach?” let’s go back to how you got started in aerial training.

### ...And Continues with Service

Service is the heart of teaching. Do you have the personality and the drive to be a teacher? Let’s face it: financial abundance is no reason to enter this profession. Teaching is about giving and sharing knowledge. To discover more about your interest in teaching, answer the following questions.

What was your background in movement training? Were you an athlete, or was physical training new for you?

- Y N Do you enjoy working with people?
- Y N Are you a nurturing person?
- Y N Are you a curious person? Teachers are lifelong learners.
- Y N Does sharing knowledge bring you joy and satisfaction?
- Y N Do you have a knack for explaining things to others?
- Y N Do you have a strong foundation in what you wish to teach?
- Y N Are you observant of the human body and how it works?
- Y N Do you enjoy breaking down movements into smaller pieces?
- Y N Do you enjoy celebrating the successes of others?

How has aerial training affected you as a person (or has it)? What life lessons did you learn/are you still learning? Write a brief testimonial and share it with a colleague.

If you answered yes to most of the questions above, it is a safe bet that teaching fits your personality. Note any questions where you answered no, because those might be areas of growth for you.

### Dissecting the Word “Teacher”

We have many different words that fit the category of teaching. According to Merriam-Webster:

- To *teach* is “to guide the studies of; to impart the knowledge of; to instruct by precept, example, or experience.”
- A *mentor* is “a trusted counselor or guide.”
- A *master* is “a worker or artisan qualified to teach apprentices,” or “an artist, performer, or player of consummate skill.”
- A *guru* is “a person with knowledge or expertise.”<sup>1</sup>

All of us have had many teachers throughout our lives including at school, at home through parents/guardians, and via any number of surprise mentors who have popped up along the way. Here is a brief list of mentors who impacted my life.

1. My dad, a farmer, taught me that you can learn a lot about life by observing nature. Perhaps this is why I am so interested in human growth!
2. My mom, a business instructor, taught me how to be an entrepreneur. I would not have been able to start Revolve Aerial Dance without her guidance.
3. Mrs. Weathers, my high school English teacher, taught me a very methodical way of writing term papers. Without that foundation, this book would not exist (or at least it would not make much sense).

Everyone has a favorite teacher who inspired them, and this experience has a tremendous impact on how and why we teach. From personality and expectations to personal treatment, we learn from all of our teachers, both positive and negative.

## Exemplary Teaching

Referring back to Merriam-Webster, an *exemplar* is “an ideal model.”<sup>1</sup> There are many ideal models out there, and no single right way to teach a class. However, there are many wrong ways to teach a class, which is why good teachers spend so much time planning, researching, and reflecting on their practice. Everyone has a unique perspective, and your students choose to study with you because of who you are. The one thing all exemplary teachers have in common is effectiveness. *Effectiveness* in teaching involves “producing a decided, decisive, or desired effect.”<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, good teaching is so much more than giving directions and having students follow your lead. I divide teaching into three core components or domains: physical (the body), cognitive (the mind), and social/emotional (the heart/spirit). Each paragraph below describes each domain in more depth. Please note that the following sections may contain some generalizations, and not all effective teachers fit into these generalizations.

### Physical Ability (Body)

An effective movement teacher can physically demonstrate the movement and skills they are teaching with strong technique and accuracy. A movement teacher must be able to dissect or take a skill apart and articulate each body position and motion. Of course there are teachers capable of teaching skills that do not work on their own bodies, or even teaching without demonstrating. But I find these folks are exceptions to the rule. I do find that the amount of physical knowledge that a coach possesses must be vast enough to cue the student safely and effectively, whether or not they actually demonstrate. An effective teacher also knows what can go wrong in a skill, the common mistakes students make, and how to help students avoid these traps. For example, leaning in a certain direction on the fabric while standing in a fabric foot lock might make the student fall, while leaning another direction will help them stay balanced and upright. An effective teacher will most likely tell students where to send their weight in a skill before having them try it out.

### Cognitive Ability (Mind)

An effective teacher in the cognitive domain is strong in two areas: knowledge and communication of knowledge. First, a teacher with great knowledge understands the skills mentally. This teacher knows how things work, including the theory and physics underpinning the skills, and cause and effect (if I move in this way, then that will happen). This teacher is usually interested in research and exploring movement from a conceptual place. This teacher can also analyze movement in terms of timing, phrasing, spatial direction, force, dynamics, and weight shift.

Make a list remembering those parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors who impacted your life. Make a list of things they taught you (life lessons, etc.) and share with a friend. Better yet, call and thank them!

Think back to your favorite teacher. Why was this person your favorite?

Now think back to your least favorite teacher. Why was this person your least favorite?

Reflect on your physical, cognitive, and social/emotional abilities. Which area is your strength? In which area could you improve?

Second, an effective teacher can communicate knowledge to others. This sounds obvious, but communication is often overlooked and explains why those who can do cannot always teach. The effective teacher can explain ideas to a variety of students with different learning styles and ways of understanding. This teacher can layer information in small doses and approach the same idea from many different angles. This teacher can usually interpret body language and know whether or not students are “getting it.”

The reason I separate knowledge from communication of knowledge is because these abilities are often exclusive. Some folks have a high level of understanding of their craft, but cannot explain it to others. This may be because many strong performers may not have had to consider how they got from point A to point B in their own learning, or their learning process is so different from their students’ that gaps occur in their explanations. A huge part of teaching involves translating, which involves knowing your own movement language as well as the movement language your students understand. We will discuss more about getting to know your students in Chapter 10.

### **Social/Emotional Ability (Heart/Spirit)**

An effective teacher in the social/emotional realm teaches out of service to others and out of joy for their craft. This teacher is sensitive to the emotional needs of others and offers nurturing advice and guidance. This teacher believes in what they are teaching, because they live it. This teacher must have a firm set of principles by which they live, so as to gain the trust of their students and maintain positive working relationships. Kate Edwards of Spin City Pole and Aerial Fitness (UK) states, “I find this aspect of teaching has the most direct correlation with the retention of students. A lot of students return to Spin City for the community they feel part of.”

An ineffective teacher in the social/emotional domain is one who teaches for fame, status, or money and does not really care about their students. According to Fahri, “When a teacher does not have a healthy ego structure, she may express envy, jealousy, or covert anger when a student’s progress surpasses her own development.”<sup>2</sup> A dance professor once told me that she sincerely hoped that her students would surpass her, because that is what teaching is all about. Sir Isaac Newton’s famous quote confirms this idea: “If I saw further it was because I stood on the shoulders of giants.” The influence of a great teacher spreads infinitely like ripples in a pond and allows us to grow beyond the abilities of the past.

“With great power comes great responsibility.”

- Uncle Ben, *Spiderman*  
(Marvel)

### **Principles**

Every teacher, like every book or piece of literature, is founded upon a set of principles that reveal the heart of a person. Principles are core elements of living that lead to success and satisfaction. According to Covey, principles are self-evident, meaning we knew of their truth deep down at a young age.<sup>3</sup> Through my own research and life experience I have noticed some key principles that support my own teaching and writing. My goal in sharing these principles with you is to let you know where I stand as an educator and to provide context for the specific teaching methods and theories I discuss in this book. These principles stem from western psychology, Eastern philosophy, the philosophy of America’s founders, theology, and current practices in people management. I do not claim to have mastered the living of these principles, because that takes a lifetime and then some, but sharing these with you should help you to better understand my teaching philosophy/point of view.

Make a list of your own principles that guide your teaching and daily living. As you move through this text, notice which principles are at play in each section.

**Human Value:** Every human being is valuable beyond measure. Human beings do not have to earn their value, as they already possess it by existing. Therefore, prevention of injuries, sound safety practices, and respect for emotional well-being are paramount in supporting and preserving human life.

**Human Potential:** Every human being has the potential to contribute his/her unique abilities in this world. Learning is essential to developing this potential, and learning involves moving out of one's comfort zone into a challenge zone. Mentors help students confront their fears and guide them on the journey toward greater ability and awareness.

**Personal Responsibility:** We are individually responsible for our own actions. In aerial work, these actions include but are not limited to: seeking education, understanding rigging safety, establishing a safe environment and rapport with students, and serving the community.

**Abundance:** Everyone has unique abilities to contribute to the world, and everyone can achieve their potential. Everyone can win. And since everyone can win, there is no reason to compete with others, only to compete with yourself.

**Choice:** The learning environment gives students choices as autonomous individuals. Students are not forced to do tricks they fear or have little interest in doing (although they must be informed of the importance of progressions for their learning). That being said, students who are ultimately not interested in what a recreational class has to offer will often self-select out of the class.

**Discipline:** Discipline yields freedom. Keeping promises, making and sticking to goals, and delaying gratification for something you want later are all signs of discipline. Freedom comes from having control of the self.

**Process:** Discipline is a process. There are no shortcuts, only baby steps.

**Collaboration:** Two heads are better than one. Working with someone else who complements you will challenge you to grow.

**Leadership:** Every teacher is automatically in a position of public leadership. The teacher/leader is responsible for helping to bring out the best in others by setting the example for principled behavior.

**Integrity:** Honor the lineage of the work and give credit to your sources. Staying true to the art form and its demands allows students to develop respect for the form as well as for the people who have contributed to its development. Integrity also encourages students to respect themselves as they learn to take risks and pull through challenges.

## Are You Ready to Grow?

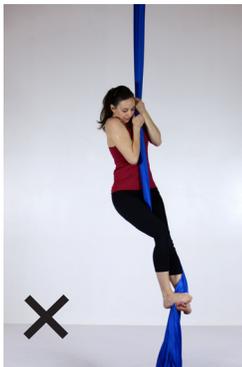
We do not often view teachers as the ones who grow in society—after all, growing is for students, right? If you have this misconception about teaching, let me be the first to tell you that you will grow so much through teaching if only you have the courage to do so. Courage demands self-reflection, or looking at oneself to notice strengths and weaknesses. As a teacher, you will be in a position of leadership because you will model for students of all ages how to train/live. Your job will involve demonstrating how you approach and solve

When can failure be considered a positive thing?

# Chapter 8

## Principles of Aerial Movement

Teaching movement isn't just about knowing a sequence of steps and spatial cues (put your right foot here, and your left arm there). It's about understanding the deeper coordination in the body that allows connected movement to happen, and then being able to communicate that information to the student either verbally or through physical cueing. *Principles of movement* are fundamental unchanging "laws" that govern the mechanics of the human body. As the instructor, your job is to be a detective and discover the missing pieces in a student's technique, using movement principles as a magnifying glass. This enables you to help students problem-solve and work with their unique bodies.



**Incorrect:** It is common for beginner students not to get a good stand in the feet and to "death grip" the fabric because they are sliding. This results in elevated shoulders.



**Correct:** Solid climbing involves a hollow body position (see page 51) with the shoulders pressing down and a light grip in the hands.

### Compensation Patterns

Most beginners have similar ways of coping with aerial work. These patterns of compensation are based on the physical patterns accumulated from living and working in the information age. *Compensatory movement* is "a change in the movement of one or more joints in response to restricted movement in other joints so that a given task can be carried out."<sup>1</sup> A range of environmental factors, cause these compensations to occur in the body:

- **Work Habits:** Computers encourage slouching, backache, and eyestrain.
- **Furniture:** Deep sofas/chairs further encourage the rounding of the spine.
- **Trauma:** Our bodies are designed to compensate by protecting the injured area, but often we never release these compensation patterns that cause an unbalanced posture. Trauma can also be emotional. From an eastern perspective, emotions are often stored in the hip flexors, as three chakras reside here (root, emotion, and power centers).<sup>2</sup>
- **Mental or Emotional States:** Sadness can cause slouching or enclosing in the torso, while happiness can result in more relaxed, open posture. Confidence can result in a nicely stacked posture, but feeling the need to present confidence can result in puffing up the chest and arching the low back.

Most students exhibit the same compensatory patterns when they first begin aerial work:

- **Lack of Core Support:** The core "hangs out" with no engagement or support, resulting in tension in the lower back and an exaggerated lumbar curve (lordosis).
- **Shoulder Elevation:** The upper body must work harder because the core is often not doing its fair share of the work, causing the shoulders to elevate.<sup>3</sup>
- **Over-gripping:** Students fear letting go or falling, so they over-grip. This causes the forearms to burn out and the fingers to become sore.
- **Lack of Stability:** Students lack grounded support through the apparatus and feel disconnected from it, as if they are floating out in space with no anchor. They lack balance and thus have a fear of falling.
- **Being Overtired:** Students tire easily because the new experience is overwhelming their ability to process sensation.

## Movement Principles

Our overall goal as instructors (particularly in recreational teaching) is not only to help students achieve their aerial goals, but also to help them carry healthy body habits into daily living. Aerial training can change a person's body for the better, including their posture, the way they present themselves to the world, and the way they feel about themselves. All principles can be addressed at all levels of training, but I have listed them in a progressive order from concepts easily trained on the ground, to first steps in the air, to moving up in the art form. Principles that can be trained on the ground in a warm-up are posture/alignment, core support, coordination, body positioning, and flexibility. First steps in the air include shoulder engagement, grip strength, upper body strength, symmetry, and grounding/balance. Moving up in the aerial world requires leverage, dynamic power, spatial/rotational awareness, transitions/sequencing, and articulation/lines.

## Ground Training

All aerial classes should start with a floor warm-up to teach foundational concepts of aerial training. Developing solid alignment, core support, coordination, and body positioning will greatly serve the students working in the air.

### 1. Posture/Alignment

According to the Cleveland Clinic, "Posture is the position in which you hold your body upright against gravity while standing, sitting, or lying down."<sup>4</sup> Good posture allows the joints to be aligned or stacked so that less strain is placed on the muscles and soft tissues. The spine naturally contains four curves, and it is normal to have some curvature especially in the lumbar spine (low back). Keeping the pelvis in its natural alignment with the rest of the body is called neutral spine. Another option is using an imprinted spine, where the back is completely flat against the ground in a lying position. Imprinting is part of the hollow body position used in aerial acrobatics, and is also a staple in the classical Pilates method (see the Core Support section for photos).

With sound alignment, movement becomes more efficient because the body has more power and leverage in an aligned position. Joints also remain healthier when aligned, which prevents pain and injury. Good posture also gives off positive energy to the people with whom you live and work. Educating aerial students on posture is critical to their safety in the air as it makes the training process healthier for the body.



Slouching: This posture, according to Thomas Hanna, is the Red Light Reflex. It is a fear response, and enough fear results in giving up.



Lordosis/Hyperextension: Hanna calls this posture the Green Light Reflex. It reflects a nonstop lifestyle of go, go, go!

Experience: Try to lift another person by wrapping your arms around their waist. The first time, have the flyer release all tension in the body and become "dead weight." Notice how heavy that person feels. The second time, have the flyer tense or contract the muscles. Notice how much lighter the person feels. Keep in mind that their actual weight hasn't changed, but the level of muscular engagement changes how the body relates to gravity. Apply this principle to core support in aerial training by using appropriate muscular support to make your movement more efficient.

Experience: Hold your arms high above your head, and try not to smile. This may be difficult because the way we move can affect the way we feel, just as the way we feel affects the way we move. Now try sitting up tall, followed by slouching. What do you notice about your emotions in each posture?

Experience: In a group or class setting, walk around the room in your normal posture. Notice how your feet hit the floor, where your head is placed, whether or not your torso shifts as you walk, and whether or not your hips shift. Now try leading with the head. Exaggerate it. Observe everyone in the room walking this way, and notice what characters come to mind. Now try leading your walk with your right shoulder. Again, observe others. Then try leading with the left foot, or other body part. Finish by returning to normal walking. Which "body part lead" felt most normal to you? With a partner, discuss observations about yourself and characters/emotions that came to mind.

# Chapter 10

## Knowing Your Students

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Effective teachers get to know their students in order to plan the best training for them. People are diverse, from their background and experiences to beliefs and values. As you plan your classes, consider student goals, experience, age, ability, gender, personality, and health issues.

Within this chapter, the suggestions seek to: a) honor and respect how each person works, and b) push their limits so growth happens. The second half of this chapter focuses on challenges students face and tips on how to help students move through these challenges.

### Goals

Who are your students, and why are they training with you?

- **Heart:** Why is the student studying aerial work? What are their goals? Each student has different reasons for training, and your choices in class about what and how you teach should reflect those goals.
- **Body:** What is the physical background of the students? Do they have any dance or gymnastics training, or are they relatively new to movement training? Remember that aerial work requires and develops spatial awareness, kinesthetic awareness, strength, flexibility, and balance. Do any of the students have challenges such as health or weight issues? Students with weight or other health issues should contact their health care provider before training with you.
- **Mind:** What mental qualities do your students possess? How do they find their focus? Are they self-aware?
- **Connection:** Do students connect their mind, body, and heart when working in a class? Are they self-aware, meaning do they listen to their bodies and use their minds to consider risks/danger? You may need to teach students how to care for themselves during a demanding class.

Keep in mind that your ability level as a teacher must match up with student goals. If one of your students wants to become a professional performer and you do not have experience in this area, recommend that the student audition for a professional training program to get the instruction they seek.

### Experience

What movement experience do your students have? If your student is a dancer, they will appreciate dance terminology to cross-reference with aerial terms that are new to them. The same goes for yoga practitioners, martial artists, gymnasts, and other athletes. The more easily you can communicate with your students, the quicker they will learn. It is also important to note that many people come into aerial arts without much movement experience behind them. As the teacher, you will need to be extra vigilant in guiding them toward finding kinesthetic, spatial, and self-awareness. You will also need to

prepare for worst-case scenarios and hope that you won't actually need to use those plans!

What age groups do you enjoy teaching and why?

## Age

Learners of various ages and stages in life differ greatly. At different stages of maturation, the brain functions differently, and the goals of the individual vary based on life experience.

**Adults:** Adults operate from the frontal lobe (logical) portion of the brain.<sup>1</sup> This means they generally understand cause and effect. For example, an adult knows that letting go of the apparatus will likely result in a fall. Here are suggestions for teaching adults:

- Explain *why* you have chosen a specific exercise if they seem hesitant not from fear, but from a logical place of “what will this do for me?”
- Incorporate problem solving into the class to feed their logical side.
- If a student struggles with a move, explain the cause and effect of how different positions, momentum, and weight shift may help them achieve the move.
- Create opportunities for creativity and exploration to stretch them beyond logical thought.

**Teens:** Teens tend to be driven by emotions due to hormonal changes in the body. They experience drastic physical changes (growth spurts, puberty) in a short amount of time. Growth spurts are particularly challenging for young women because their center of gravity and weight distribution changes in this stage of life. Some teens are highly motivated, while others are withdrawn and may appear lazy. Teens do tend to take more risks than adults because they still operate from their mid-brain, an impulsive center that emphasizes the present moment and results in gut or emotional responses.<sup>1</sup> Teens often struggle with self-esteem because they think everyone is looking at them and judging them. Here are suggestions for teaching teens:

- Offer lots of encouragement, but get them to do the work. If at first they don't succeed, ask them to try it again with a smile on your face.
- Teens can be afraid of certain skills. Do your best to read the situation. In cases where the student is a hard worker and usually participates, don't force them to do a skill they don't want to do. However, you could persuade them to try an easier version or smaller progression of that skill. For example, if a student is afraid to try straddle-ups, have her practice straddle-ups in the fabric knot so she is still working.
- Have students who avoid the apparatus do ground training such as push-ups and handstands at the wall. This will encourage them to participate in some way, and join the aerial training when they are ready.
- Feel the mood of the room. What do the students need today? They are in a highly emotional stage in life and need lots of structure to develop a strong work ethic and sense of self.

**Children:** Like teens, children operate from their temporal lobe or mid-brain, or the impulsive center.<sup>2</sup> They are most interested in experiencing wonder, play, and imagination. Children do what feels good to them in the moment. They have less sense of self-preservation than adults do. Children will often let go of the equipment without thinking about what will happen as a result. Here are suggestions for teaching children:

- Be enthusiastic and animated.
- Establish rules and boundaries at the beginning of class.

“Empathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself.”  
- Mohsin Hamid

# Chapter 27

## Building a Curriculum

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A *curriculum* is a set of courses or classes offered at a school. The purpose of a curriculum is to clarify goals and offerings between the studio owner, the instructors, and the students. If a student has a question about what they are learning in class, the instructor should be able to explain why and how it integrates with other studio courses. While some studio owners design their own curriculum, some studios rely on the expertise of their instructors to develop a syllabus for each course they teach and then integrate their instructional goals with those of other instructors. A written curriculum is also an asset to a solid risk management policy, supporting the studio's case in the event of an insurance claim, and enhances the professionalism of the business.

In the aerial arts, it is important to evaluate what skills fall into different levels of ability, as well what approach is truest to the teacher's interests and background. Some schools operate in the circus tradition, which usually involves moving through a progression of skills in a linear fashion before advancing to the next level. Other schools operate from an aerial dance perspective, with more emphasis on improvisation and choreography. Before a curriculum can be effectively developed, leaders must develop a clear mission first.

### **Mission**

When developing your own curriculum, consider your mission as an aerial instructor by referring back to your teaching philosophy. What inspires you to teach and train? Who do you want to work with? What student goals match up with the skills you have to offer? What foundational principles provide an anchor for your teaching and training?

*Brainstorm words that come to mind when you picture your dream school. Consider who you are and who your students are. Once you get your pencil moving, go deeper for words with more weight. Then circle three to five key words that actually say something unique or specific about what you do and why you do it. Do not choose the words "aerial" or "movement," because they do not differentiate you from other aerial schools. (Activity adapted from "Making Your Life As An Artist").<sup>1</sup>*

In the preface of this book, I mentioned principles that anchor my teaching, including personal responsibility, prevention of injuries, investment in human potential, and respect for the change process. Think about the unchanging principles that guide you at the core of your being. Once you have a list of principles, start to prioritize and rank them. What is most important to you? What principle is a close second? What is third? Add these words to your list above, and circle any new words that are unique and specific.

From this list of words, begin free writing. You can work toward a full-paragraph mission statement (which is great for a website), but you could also narrow it down to three items that define your culture and are catchy/easy to remember. For example, the athletic leadership team at Proactive Coaching recommends training children in three progressive stages: 1) Teach them to love the game; 2) Teach them how to play the game; and 3) Teach them how to compete.<sup>2</sup> Aerial Space in Asheville, NC, promotes a similar culture of: 1) Safety, 2) Smiles, and 3) Skills.

Now that you have a narrative mission statement and/or a list of core ideas, think about how your mission will influence staff training and curriculum choices. Here are some extreme examples for the sake of simplicity, but many schools use a combination of these ideas.

- **Excellence:** A studio whose primary mission is excellence will invest most of their time and energy into hiring and educating their staff. The latest research and industry standards will be presented at staff meetings, instructors will be evaluated regularly, and instructors may even mentor each other regarding best teaching practice. Courses may be arranged linearly with clear skill progressions from one level to the next, and all courses will be standardized with specific skills required to “graduate” to the next level.
- **Innovation:** A studio whose primary mission is innovation will be most interested in having a curious and creative staff. Instructors may be given work time in the studio to research and investigate new ideas. Staff meetings might look more like playtime, with one idea giving way to many more ideas. Courses will be arranged by area of interest and may involve a mixture of skill progressions and creative explorations. Each individual teacher may bring their own unique style to the table, making each class slightly different.
- **Community Building:** A studio whose mission is to share knowledge with as many people as possible from all walks of life will invest time and energy into hiring/training encouraging teachers, arranging group training times for both faculty and students, and providing performance and sharing opportunities for everyone. Courses will vary widely as this type of studio will offer many different programs to meet the needs of diverse groups of students.

## Mission-Driven Curriculum

Once you have clarified your mission, let’s discuss how a curriculum can be mission-driven. The purpose of creating a curriculum is:

- To establish a system of values that supports the work.
- To establish a training structure that supports student success.
- To maintain consistency, keeping everyone (multiple instructors, students) on the same page as far as levels and structure are concerned.

Let’s start with values. The structure of your curriculum, including the courses and levels offered, reflects a set of values. Does your school serve mostly chil

“You can design and create, and build the most wonderful place in the world. But it takes people to make the dream a reality.”  
- Walt Disney

# About the Author

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Julianna Gaillard Hane, native of Ft. Motte, SC, traded life on a cotton farm to become a dancer and aerialist. She is the founder of Revolve Aerial Dance in Charleston, SC and a graduate of the Professional Training Program at the New England Center for Circus Arts. Since her first student aerial performance at Winthrop University in 2001, she has performed professionally in corporate events, festivals, and concerts. She has also staged both dance and aerial choreography for various college dance companies. Her creative process involves merging aerial arts with dance and Laban theory.

Julianna holds an MFA in Modern Dance from the University of Utah, a BA in Dance from Winthrop University, a certificate in Laban Bartenieff Movement Analysis, and is an RYT-200 through Yoga Alliance. Having taught at several K-12 schools, private studios, circus schools and colleges, she is currently on the dance faculty at the College of Charleston.

Julianna is fascinated by the teaching process, and enjoys working with students on integrating function (technique) with expression (art). She co-wrote *The Aerial Hoop Manual Vols. 1 & 2* with Rebekah Leach, further expanding her love for hoop. She now leads teacher trainings for Born to Fly™ Productions combining her unique background in dance, circus, and somatics to mentor aerial teachers. She also teaches with Susan Murphy at the Marsh Studio in coastal Georgia. When Julianna isn't busy flying around, she enjoys spending time with her family on the farm.



Photo Credit: Kiqe Bosch