

Reading, writing and ... rhythm?
Workshop explores dance as teaching aid
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SCOTT — Eric Johnson eyed his class and asked them to show him the capital letter “M.”

His students hurriedly crooked their arms, shifted their legs and some took to the floor to illustrate the letter with their limbs.

Very few formations in the class of 18 bodies were alike.

“What you just saw is exactly how art works ... Artists show how they’re thinking or feeling,” Johnson said.

While some are more effective at expression than others, “every artist solves a problem in their own way,” Johnson said.

The activity was one of several the Seattle-based dance instructor shared with his class of students: 18 educators ready to learn how to incorporate dance into English, math and science lessons.

The professional development workshop, led by Johnson at L. Leo Judice Elementary on Thursday, targeted kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers and included two administrators. Johnson is a dance specialist who works with public and private schools in Seattle.

Through simple movements, students can be engaged in “active learning” rather than traditional “look-and-listen” instruction, he said.

“It’s using movement to make the learning physical,” Johnson said.

The workshop was offered by the Acadiana Center for the Arts with funding from the Lafayette Parish School System. Teachers pay a nominal fee for the workshops, presented by professionals in the teachers’ fields, and they receive continuing learning units for their participation.

The workshops are part of the AcA’s Arts in Education program, which supports giving teachers the opportunity to connect classroom lessons in English language arts, science, math and social students with the arts.

The center offers about 15 workshops each year, said Bree Sargent, education director for the AcA's Arts in Education program.

Visiting artists as well as local artists, who are trained to present workshops, share their expertise in the sessions, she said.

Earlier this month, workshops on using puppetry in telling folktales, and script writing and visual art exercises for pre-writing activities were offered.

Student data is used to develop the workshops, said Sandy LaBry, instructional supervisor for Lafayette Parish Schools.

"When we plan a series, we think about the needs of our students based on data. What are the areas where our students could use additional help?" LaBry said.

Upcoming workshops are scheduled through March.

On Thursday, Johnson demonstrated how to teach English language arts using punctuation mark movement exercises along with two other lessons that focused on math skills and the water cycle.

He showed the teachers a warm-up exercise that requires students to make "fantastic shapes" by conforming arms, legs, head and spine based on direction, using vocabulary words such as "angular" or "curvy."

The movement has more purpose than fun, and helps work students' muscles, he said.

"It helps with trunk control," Johnson said, which helps build fine motor skills.

"Kindergarten and first-grade teachers find it helps with handwriting," Johnson said.

Johnson has visited Lafayette before and wore a souvenir from a past trip: a green Katharine Drexel Elementary T-shirt with the slogan: "There's nothing better than a Drexel gator!"

He taught the workshop in his socks and encouraged the teachers to take off their shoes to fully work the muscles in their feet. He said he asks the same of students' he works with in Seattle-area schools, but advised teachers to do what fits their classroom.

Throughout the lesson Johnson offered practical tips on how the teachers could overcome potential obstacles in implementing the movement activities — whether in the layout of a classroom or in ways to deal with children who don't want to participate.

Teachers also took “reflective breaks” to discuss how they’d situate their rooms for the movement exercises or to discuss the lesson.

The exercises can be used as visual assessment tools for teachers to know what grammar areas students may need extra help with, he said.

“You can circulate the room and understand where students are with their punctuation,” he said. “This is truly a performance assessment. You know who needs help.”

Movement can also be used to prompt reflections from their students, Johnson said. He led the teachers through another simple exercise they could do with their students.

“I hold a shape when I read a newspaper,” Johnson said with slightly bent arms raised and holding his imaginary newsprint.

Teachers quickly joined in with their own sentences and shapes: “I hold a shape when I ... answer my phone ... when I’m drinking my Diet Coke ... when I’m reading my Kindle.”

Brittini Gravouia, a first-year special education teacher at Burke Elementary, said she’ll incorporate the movement exercises as an assessment tool.

“I have two kids who are pretty much nonverbal,” Gravouia said. She works with students in grades first through fifth and said she makes an effort to offer them active learning exercises.

“I try to keep them moving as much as possible,” she said.

Racheal Anderson is a long-time educator but first-time kindergarten teacher who attended Thursday’s session to get ideas for her classroom.

“They love dance, jumping and moving,” said Anderson, who teaches at Epiphany Day School in New Iberia.

Johnson’s exercises are doable and easily relatable to her classroom, she said. More importantly, she said, she knows her students will enjoy the learning.

“They love it anytime they can do something different,” she said.