A multitude of misconceptions surround the topic of dance technique, specifically classical ballet. Unfortunately, these assumptions impose a negative façade on the art form causing such factors to negate the value and purpose of the form in its entirety. One of the assumptions being that the rigor and demands of dance training forbear negative standards that the dancers feel they must adhere to. Whether it is related to weight, or authoritarian approaches to pedagogy, ballet dancers are surrounded by the stigma that their work primarily consists of pain and excruciating effort with little or unsatisfactory reward. However, all of these assumptions regarding ballet technique fail to identify one of the most crucial aspects of art making – intrinsic rewards, motivation and pleasure.

The following paper will elaborate upon the misconceptions of ballet technique and shed light on the forgotten elements of ballet training and its innate pleasure.

One of the most politically charged discussions surrounding ballet technique is its strong focus on physical aesthetic. Many believe that the so-called “expectation” of thinness leads dancers to engage in disordered eating and other damaging habits. It has been proven that, “young ballet dancers’ quest for a very specific physical ideal can lead to body image disturbances and distortions, eating disorders such as anorexia, slow cognitive development, and amenorrhea (associated in ballet dancers with under-nutrition, low calcium levels and a decrease in oestrogen)” (Kolb 109). Furthermore, critics believe that the components of ballet training such as flexibility, turn-out and
intense jumps and footwork cause dancers to be susceptible to joint, muscle and bone damage. Even more so, such virtuosic elements push dancers beyond their limits, which not only leads to physical injury and bodily exhaustion, but also mental fatigue such as burn out. The numerous internal and external pressures cause the dancer to internalize all criticism and judgment. Inevitably, this causes the dancer to assume that her instrument is problematic and thus, they search for methods to change or alter it, usually resorting to unhealthy methods.

Continuing the discussion on critiques of classical ballet, there is a strong negative outlook on its pedagogical approaches. In a classical ballet training setting, there is a culture that recognizes the instructor as the expert by which they impersonally provide information to the students. This methodology leads many to view the relationship between the instructor and the dancer as extremely inauthentic and unconducive to the learning process. Furthermore, it is believed that the innate repetition of ballet technique removes any opportunity for individuality, leaving the performance stagnant and synthetic. By undervaluing the individuality and personal expression of each dancer, the dancers as a whole appear as “like peas in a pod” with nothing whatsoever to differentiate them” (Kolb 110).

The critiques mentioned above rest on an extremely superficial understanding of ballet technique with complete disregard to the necessity of pleasure in the art making process. It is universally understood that following the accomplishment of a given task, there remains a by-product of gratification and intrinsic reward. This very phenomenon can be applied to ballet training as the holistic demands of ballet training present challenges, but nevertheless lead to an inherent reward. Additionally, the essence of
dance allows an element of ‘play’ as, “…it is invariably done voluntarily as an activity separate from the mundane responsibilities and work routines of everyday life.” (Kolb 114). Furthermore, in professional settings, dancers look at their art as, “…a relief from work and…constitutes the very essence of their labours” (Kolb 114). Regardless of genre, there is an ever-present authenticity that is inserted in the dance making process. Even in the structure and repetition of classical ballet techniques, dancers are able to make meaning and personalize the material for their own spiritual and emotional benefit.

As a dancer who is in the midst of her collegiate training, I can confidently say that classical ballet has always remained an integral and fulfilling part of my dance education. The challenges are tri-fold, and only invite opportunity for growth, artistic exploration and achievements. A life committed to dance means living as a life-long learner – one who is endlessly and actively yearning for more information to add to current dance training and knowledge. The implications of the “unsatisfied” artist allows for endless opportunities for pleasure to be experienced. Unfortunately, the many critics of ballet fail to recognize how the exertion of effort in and of itself consistently bears pleasure. Instead of relying on a one-sided understanding of classical technique, we must acknowledge the holistic process including intrinsic reward and motivation systems.
Works Cited