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# Honoring All Bodies:

## Student-Centered Alignment Cueing to Improve Dance Skills

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### ABSTRACT

*In this article the authors present practical approaches to alignment cueing using the Functional Awareness® approach to embodied anatomy. The pedagogical philosophy is beneficial for all levels of dance skill. We describe specific instructional practices to enhance understanding of the body, and the cueing can be incorporated in any dance class. The classroom applications encourage foot and ankle stability and explore hip joint mobility through the use of student-centered discovery cueing, anatomical visualizations, and self-tactile body mapping. The Functional Awareness approach provides purposeful cueing language to self-assess without subjective judgment, honoring the body structure of each student, and supporting dancer wellness. We propose that the practice of assessment without judgment and equity-informed alignment cueing nurtures student agency and develops efficacy in action.*

**S**tudent centered equity-informed alignment cueing is a series of learning strategies to practice purposeful mental training for dynamic alignment and self-assessment processes free from emotional, judgmental self-talk. The cueing process enhances body understanding and sensory awareness and honors all body constructs to promote opportunity for body positivity while learning to dance. Student-centered, equity-informed cueing is part of the developing pedagogy of Functional Awareness® (FA), a practical somatic approach to embodied anatomy through reflective practice. FA is a method designed by the authors over the past ten years. We investigate current research and trends in motor learning and functional anatomy and then design strategies that can be implemented into the dance classroom or studio. Our recent research is in developing student-centered practices that educate dancers to anatomical variances and unique features of our human body structure that can support improved learning and skill building while developing self-agency. These cueing practices in body learning integrated into the dance class can be applied with students from ages 5 to 95. The process for developing student-centered, equity-informed alignment cueing is informed by the authors' current research, evaluation forms, peer reviews, and conversations with mentors and peers.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

With FA student-centered cueing, the teacher initiates a prompt that encourages students to explore kinesthetic, visual, tactile, proprioceptive, and verbal means for self-discovery.

We use the term FA equity-informed cueing to refer to a method in embodied anatomy education practices and movement coaching that honors each student's individual body construct and demonstrates equity in attending to and supporting each student.

## THE FRAMEWORK FOR EQUITY-INFORMED ALIGNMENT CUEING

We use several practices in FA equity-informed alignment cueing.

*Purposeful language* encourages letting go of judgment during self-assessment. Dancers can carry judgment around body shape. Self-talk and self-assessment are necessary for students to make adjustments and improve movement skills. We propose a purposeful approach by educators and students to minimize judgment and buoy self-agency through equity-informed cueing. Here are some examples:

- ◆ Instead of good–bad, right–wrong, consider the phrase, “Is this useful for the task at hand?”
- ◆ As a substitute for giving corrections, consider providing/offering clarifications for the movement.
- ◆ Rather than assigning a value judgment to a personal body part (“I have a bad hip” or “I have bad arches”),

consider objective language of description; for example, “I currently have a different range of motion in my left hip than my right.”

*Anatomical visualizations* assist in locating skeletal landmarks used to clarify anatomical variances. The process lifts up the unique features of our human body structure and how this body understanding supports improved learning and skill building. Body mapping skeletal structure through an awareness of individual differences permits the student to optimize their movement function and expressivity. The use of anatomical visualizations is a tool for student agency. Anatomical landmarks can be explored through visual, tactile, and proprioceptive methods to provide an embodied understanding of individual skeletal constructs.

*FA student-centered learning* is a process where the teacher lets go of assumptions and expectations about the outcome and facilitates experiences for the student to explore and discover. Each student response is valid. There is no wrong answer. It is a means for personal body understanding, enhanced sensory awareness, and development of self-agency as students begin to understand their personal best practices for learning. Tools that are implemented in FA student-centered learning are movement exaggeration to sense range of motion, tactical body mapping to clarify individual structure, and self-reflection free from judgmental self-talk.

## CLASSROOM APPLICATION 1: EQUITY-INFORMED CUEING FOR STANDING FOOT BALANCE

There is a wide variety in foot shape throughout the populations of humans. Acknowledging and honoring the differences can help students let go of myths or assumptions about foot shape. One feature that varies is the arch support structure in the human foot (Figure 1).

Many people are familiar with the arch you see when looking at the medial or inside of the foot. This arch is called the medial longitudinal arch. There are many genetic differences in the configuration of the bones of the foot, providing a wide variety of differences in the shape of the various arches. A common misconception about the arches of the foot is that a low arch is not effective in load bearing and high arches are optimal. Each of these structural arrangements can provide benefits and challenges in movement. How you manage the use of the structure is more pivotal than the overall skeletal component or “look” of your foot.

Each foot has four domed support structures: the medial longitudinal arch, the lateral longitudinal arch, the anterior transverse arch, and the posterior transverse arch. In addition, the bony arches in each foot provide dynamic support when the foot is load bearing. The skeletal structure of

domes, the neuromuscular system, and the fibrous connective tissue called the plantar fascia support the actions in the lower leg and foot. These actions enable the body to store and expend energy to propel the body forward to walk or move upward to hop, leap, or jump (Figure 2).

It can be damaging to the foot and ankle if students create a medial longitudinal arch by lifting up the inside edge of the foot and rolling out (supination) toward the outside edge. Acknowledging all four arches of the foot invites an integrity for the ankle and foot structure. Equity-informed cueing invites a process to let go of the value judgment attached to any aesthetic about arch support and empower students to understand how their individual foot structure can manifest the expectations of the technical skill.

One practical example is to have students trace their foot on a sheet of paper. The students then share their

observations practicing nonjudgmental language when describing similarities and differences. You then could create a “foot museum” and create a “foot dance” that explores the stability of visualizing the four arches for balance.

## CLASSROOM APPLICATION 2: EQUITY-INFORMED EXPLORATION FOR TRIPOD OF THE FOOT

### Investigate Self-Tactile Body Mapping to Deepen Understanding of Persona/Individual Constructs

The FA anatomical visualization used to stabilize the foot for action and maximize the effectiveness of the arch structure is known as the tripod of balance of the foot.



Figure 1. Variance in foot shape.

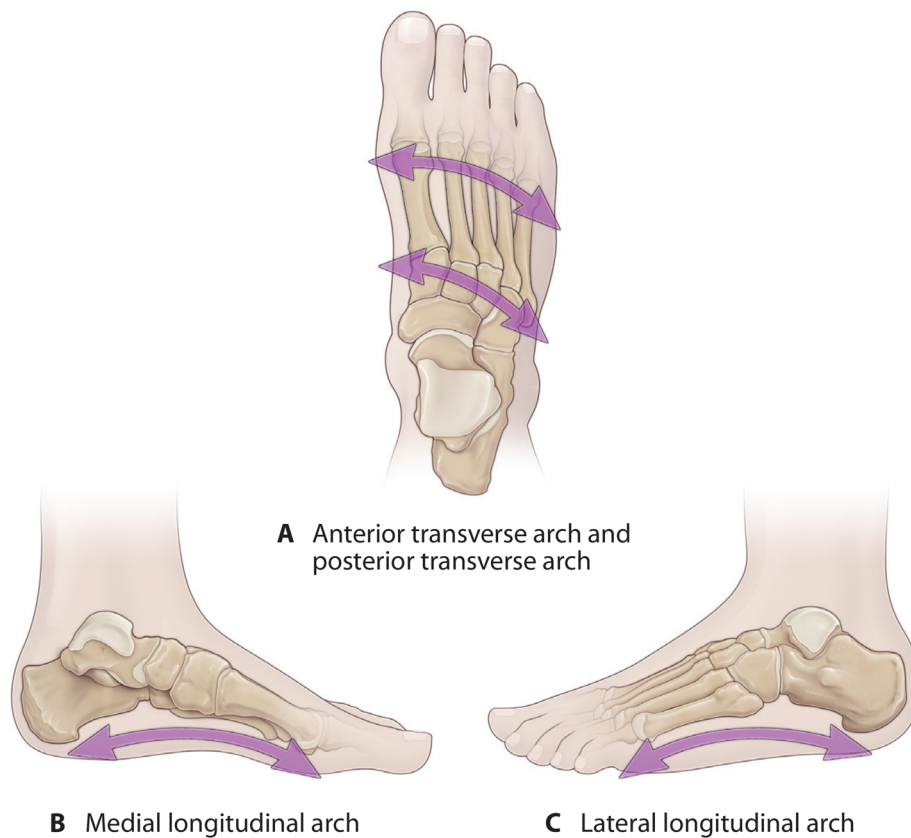
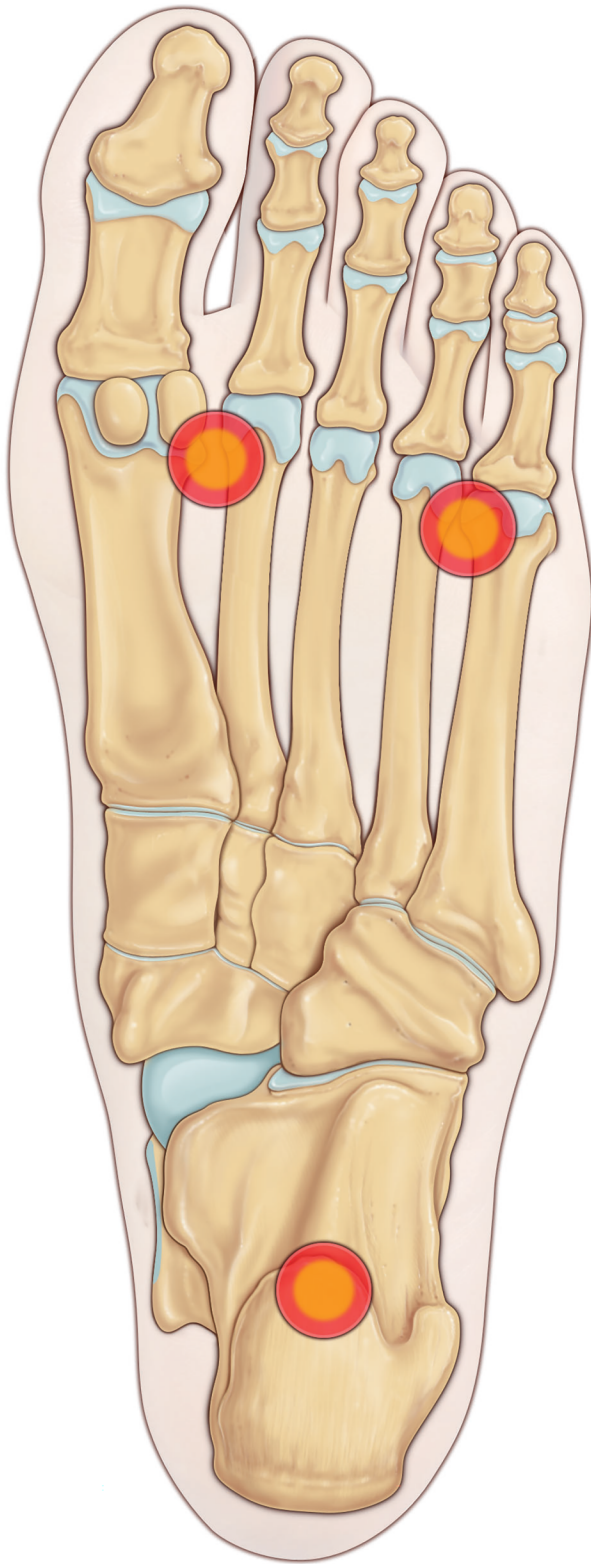


Figure 2. The four arches of the foot.



**Figure 3.** Landmarks for the tripod of the foot.

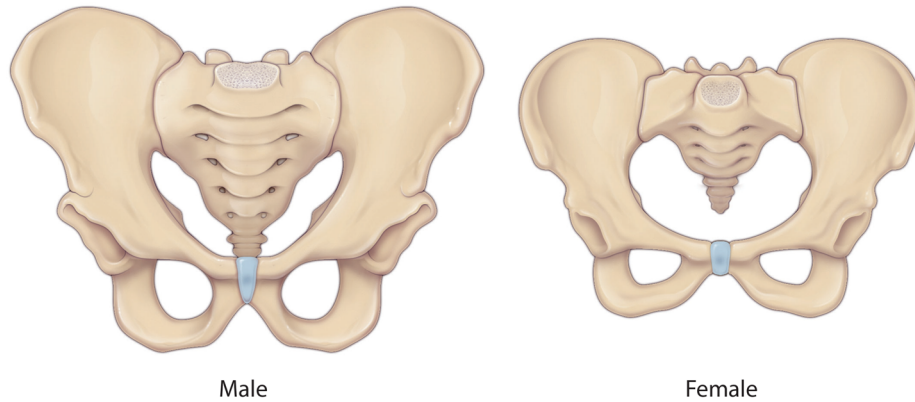
“Rather than serving as a rigid base of support, the foot is compliant in an active state and sensitive to minute shifts to navigate assured footing” (Wright, Ivanenko, and Gurfinkel 2012, 1513). The anatomical image of the tripod of

balance of the foot is not intended to create a rigid or stiff footing; rather the three points are landmarks around which the twenty intrinsic muscles of the foot can navigate and readjust for assured footing, stability, and easy readjustments. The feet are elegantly designed to aid in postural control. They are landmarks to provide stability within the ever-changing surfaces and footwork required in dance.

We can locate the landmarks of the tripod of the foot by using hands to find and rub on these three points that work together to provide stability in action.

1. The first tripod point is at the space between the fleshy pad on the ball of the foot and the pad for the second toe. Anatomically, this is the place between the distal head of the first and second metatarsal. Students can touch the space between the distal heads of the metatarsals. This can be felt on the top of the foot and then mirrored on the bottom of the foot near the big toe pad. Note the image provided (Figure 3) to help locate this point.
2. Next, students can be directed to feel the second landmark between the distal heads of the fourth and fifth metatarsals (near the fourth and pinky toe). Foot shapes vary, so this point might be located on a diagonal from the first point or it might be located straight across from the pad of the big toe.
3. The third point of reference is located on the heel or calcaneus. Students can feel these knob-shaped bones on either side of the ankle. These are the distal ends of the two bones in the shin, the tibia, and the fibula. The anatomical name is the medial and lateral malleolus. Students can rub on these bones and pretend they are creating an imaginary stirrup under the foot. The tripod’s third point of balance is at the center of the heel bone.
4. Students can touch all three points of the tripod one more time, and then stand up, and notice if they feel any difference in the sensation of balance or stability between their two feet. All students access body and somatic cueing through different sensory cueing mechanisms.
5. This tactile mapping of the tripod points is repeated on the other foot.
6. Finally, students can place both feet on the floor while standing and imagine the tripod in both feet.

In equity-informed cueing we are not looking for students to have a defined or correct experience, merely to begin to note and describe the experience without judgmental language and also honor the experience. For example, it is not a better answer if a student says, “I feel more grounded,” than if a student says, “I feel no difference.” The goal is to offer the activity and honor the integrity of their body responses with a sense of equity for each student. This approach permits the students to learn about their personal preferences and deepen body understanding.



**Figure 4.** Pelvic variances.

Using self-touch as a body mapping tool enables the student to discover the location of the landmarks for their distinctive structure. The anatomical visualization of the tripod provides a stable foundation for aligning the skeletal structure during static and dynamic balance. The tripod along with an understanding of the stability through the four arches of the foot can support both stability and agility in action.

### Creative Movement Activity to Explore the Tripod

Play with making different dance shapes. Try a low shape or middle-level shape and then think about the tripod in each of your feet. Go up on your toes and think of the tripod, lift a leg, and consider the imagery of the tripod in both feet. Note the stability that the tripod may provide regardless of personal arch shape. This activity encourages students to trust the skeletal structure they possess and discover muscular support with integrity for their personal structural design.

### CLASSROOM APPLICATION 3: EQUITY-INFORMED CUEING OF THE HIP JOINT

Examine the two pelvic shapes in [Figure 4](#) and consider the similarities and differences. One obvious distinction is the size, which can indicate sex. There are other contrasting elements in shape between the two pelvises. Look a bit deeper and see if you can identify other differences in the shape as it affects how students move their lower spine, hip joints, and legs.

Note three differences in the images in [Figure 4](#). The triangular arch between the sits bones or ischial bones is narrower in the image on the left. The large bones at the top, or ilium, are wider in the image on the right. The pelvis on the left is shaped more like a taller flower vase, and the pelvis on the right is more bowl-shaped.

Why does this matter? Students might mismap this joint because their personal structure has a narrower pubic arch and therefore the location of the joint might be closer

toward their midline. The pivotal point of flexion might be higher on a student with a vase-shaped pelvis than a teacher who may have a bowl-shaped pelvis. This could lead to unnecessary tension or inefficient muscle recruitment.

The following FA student-centered, equity-informed approach enables the student to discover their skeletal landmarks as these can appear quite different from person to person.

1. Ask students to place their index fingers on the location of both hip joints on the front of the body. Encourage them to make note of where their fingers are placed.
2. Now, invite them to place their hands onto the top of the hip ridge, anatomically known as the iliac crests. Then touch the point that is most forward on the ridge. This is the anterior superior iliac spine (ASIS).
3. Guide students to move their hands toward the pubic bone. They will feel a softer space, a hollow or indent. This area is the anterior portion of the ball-and-socket joint of the hip, where the head of the femur rests in the socket called the acetabulum.
4. Direct students to leave their fingers here and march in place. They will notice this area folding. This motion is the head of the femur gliding in the socket to allow for hip flexion. For many, the location of the hip socket is a surprising revelation. It is much closer toward the front and center of the body and closer to the pubic bone than most people visualize.
5. Provide a moment for self-reflection on what students noticed. This can be an individual written reflection or a facilitated group discussion. Purposeful, non-judgmental language is encouraged.


Tactile mapping of the hip joint takes only a moment within a dance class. Students of any age can enjoy learning more about their own bodies. This activity permits students to discover their own pelvic and hip joint placement. Individual body mapping can enhance integrity of action of the legs, from marching in a preschool movement class to leg

lifts used in many dance forms. Additionally, tactile student-centered learning can provide a clarity of location of flexion at the hip during the action of flat back to prevent strain in the lower back.

## CONCLUSION

The FA approach identifies the variances in body structure and shape in our students and seeks to deepen understanding of structural differences in a manner that celebrates the uniqueness of each human body. The cueing process helps determine modifications or adaptations to support students' efforts to use their personal physical construct to best move toward the aesthetic required in any dance form. By following the examples in this article, teachers employ anatomical visualizations such as the tripod of balance to assist in both stability and agility with dancers of all ages and levels of experience. FA cueing is a useful resource to support student agency, enhance body knowledge, and improve dynamic alignment. The FA approach explores where anatomy meets artistry. The cues integrate easily into the classroom and studio settings while not detracting from the time on task required for the primary focus of the class.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. 

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