Decolonising Tap Dance: Key Principles for Teachers

A principles-led resource supporting inclusive and culturally informed tap dance practice in the UK

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WHO THIS RESOURCE IS FOR

This resource is for tap dance teachers and dance educators working across the UK dance sector, including independent studios, schools, further and higher education, community settings and professional training environments. It is also relevant for choreographers, facilitators and organisations involved in workforce development, professional practice and skills progression.

The resource supports educators at all career stages to reflect on their role as cultural practitioners, mentors and contributors to the wider dance ecology. No prior engagement with decolonial theory is required.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This document is made to support professional reflection, skills development and inclusive practice within tap dance teaching. It offers guiding principles and reflective prompts.

Educators are encouraged to:

- Use the principles to inform and strengthen existing teaching practice
- Reflect on how historical context, language and pedagogy shape learning environments
- Engage in peer dialogue and continuing professional development
- visit the resource as part of ongoing workforce learning and progression

Decolonising tap dance is presented here as an ongoing process of learning and accountability. This resource provides a foundation for continued professional development and future sector-led initiatives.

1. WHY DECOLONISING TAP DANCE MATTERS

Tap dance is a Black American art form, shaped through African diasporic rhythm, jazz music, and lived cultural exchange. It emerged through conditions of enslavement, segregation and resistance, and has been sustained through oral transmission (knowledge passed dancer to dancer), improvisation, and community practice.

Within UK dance education, tap is often taught without its full cultural and historical context. Teaching approaches have tended to prioritise codified technique and examination structures, sometimes overlooking the Black artists, musicians, and communities who shaped the form.

Decolonising tap dance is not about removing existing practice, nor about assigning blame. It is about restoring context, rebalancing narratives, and teaching with historical accuracy and cultural responsibility. This approach supports more inclusive learning environments, deeper musical understanding and a stronger connection between tap dance and its roots. This resource invites teachers to reflect on *how* tap is taught, *what* is prioritised, and *whose knowledge* is centred in the studio and classroom.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND LINEAGE

Tap dance developed in the United States as a Black American art form, rooted in African diasporic rhythmic traditions and shaped by Black American dancers working within the conditions of enslavement, segregation and later systemic racial exclusion. African diasporic practices — rooted in West and Central African traditions — formed the core rhythmic foundation of tap dance, contributing polyrhythm, groundedness, improvisation, call-and-response and deep musical dialogue, and developing within a wider landscape of cultural exchange in the United States. Tap dance and jazz music evolved together as interconnected forms, with dancers and musicians working as part of the same rhythmic tradition — shaping, challenging and responding to one another through improvisation, swing and musical dialogue.

Histories often reference the Five Points neighbourhood of New York, where Irish indentured communities and free Black Americans lived in proximity, as a site of cultural exchange. While Irish step dance traditions — particularly forms such as sean nós ("old style") dancing, with close-to-the-ground footwork and heel-and-toe percussion — are sometimes cited as influencing aspects of percussive dance, it is important to recognise that tap dance's core rhythmic language, structure and development are fundamentally rooted in African diasporic practices and Black American innovation.

As tap evolved through social dance, vaudeville, Broadway and film, Black artists were central innovators. However, colonial and racist systems of documentation, authorship and access meant that many Black practitioners were excluded from leadership, ownership and the historical record — even as their movement vocabularies and rhythmic approaches were absorbed into mainstream culture.

Over time, formal syllabus and examination systems often prioritised uniformity, speed and visual clarity, separating tap dance from its musical roots in jazz and diminishing the importance of groove, improvisation and knowledge passed through lineage. These processes have shaped dominant teaching narratives in the UK and beyond, influencing what is valued, assessed and remembered today.

Understanding tap dance as a lineage-based form involves recognising:

Knowledge passed from dancer to dancer and musician to dancer

The central role of Black American artists as innovators, teachers and culture bearers

The impact of erasure, appropriation, and unequal access on how histories are told

Decolonising practice begins with naming these histories honestly and situating contemporary teaching within them. In practical terms, this may include:

Naming originators and key artists when teaching steps or repertoire

Providing historical context alongside technical instruction

Using jazz music intentionally within class and rehearsal settings

Encouraging students to understand tap as both a musical and cultural practice

Reflecting on which narratives and figures are most visible within teaching materials

These small shifts support a more historically informed and culturally-grounded approach to tap dance education.

This work is ongoing - histories are continually being revisited and expanded, and educators are encouraged to remain open to the multiple perspectives that shape how tap dance is understood and passed on.

A decolonial lens also invites educators to reflect on the limits of recorded history, and whose identities and contributions have been obscured through colonial systems.

Holding Complexity: Lineage, Identity and Erasure

Tap dance is widely recognised as a Black American art form rooted in African diasporic rhythm, jazz music and Black social dance traditions. This framing is essential in addressing the long history of erasure, appropriation and under-recognition of Black American artists and culture.

At the same time, a decolonial approach invites educators to acknowledge that colonial histories in the Americas also erased the presence, identities and embodied cultural practices of Indigenous peoples. Racial categories used today were imposed through colonial systems and do not fully reflect the complexity of identities, exchanges and cultural transmission that existed before and during colonisation.

This does not diminish African American lineage. Rather, it situates that lineage within a broader colonised landscape shaped by displacement, forced migration and cultural suppression. Decolonising practice encourages educators to hold this complexity with care, curiosity and humility — recognising both what is known and what has been lost or obscured.

Teachers are not expected to resolve these histories, but to remain attentive to how power shapes whose stories are told, whose are simplified, and whose are missing within dance education and cultural narratives.

3. TAP DANCE, JAZZ, AND IMPROVISATION

Tap dance and jazz music evolved together. At its core, tap is a musical conversation, not simply a display of steps. Rhythm, swing, timing, phrasing and groove are foundational. In many teaching contexts, improvisation is treated as an advanced skill or an add-on. Historically, improvisation has always been central to tap practice, supporting individuality, musical listening and collective exchange.

Re-centring jazz and improvisation may involve:

- Teaching students to listen before moving
- Working with live or recorded jazz music intentionally
- Using call-and-response, rhythm trading and shared structures
- Valuing feel, time and musical intention alongside clarity

This shift supports dancers to develop agency, confidence and musical understanding, and reconnects tap to its social and cultural roots. Re-centring improvisation also requires reflecting on how tap knowledge has historically been transmitted.

Historically, tap dance knowledge was not primarily transmitted through named steps, written notation or formal syllabi. Many masters of the form learned and shared material through social exchange: dance battles, competitions, performances, informal gatherings, street corners, backstage spaces, and conversations between dancers. Movement was observed, absorbed, adapted, and sometimes “stolen” — a term used within the community to describe learning through watching, responding, and making material one’s own.

This mode of transmission valued listening, presence, musical responsiveness and individual voice over replication. While contemporary teaching contexts often require clarity and structure, acknowledging these histories invites educators to consider how material is taught, not only what is taught.

Embedding improvisation, observation, and exchange alongside named steps and technical instruction honours the way tap knowledge has historically been shared and supports a more culturally-grounded approach to learning.

Embedding These Principles from the Start

Introducing tap dance history, musicality, and improvisation should not be reserved for advanced students. Age-appropriate engagement with lineage and cultural context can be meaningfully embedded from the earliest stages of training.

For children and beginner dancers, this may include:

- Sharing short video clips of influential tap artists
- Introducing key figures through simple facts and storytelling
- Using call-and-response rhythm and musical games
- Providing child-friendly worksheets, creative tasks, quizzes
- Reading age-appropriate books that reflect tap's cultural roots

When these elements are integrated into weekly practice, students grow up understanding tap not only as a technical form, but as a living cultural and musical tradition. Early exposure can support curiosity, respect for lineage, and deeper musical confidence over time.

4. LANGUAGE, POWER, AND THE TEACHING SPACE

Language shapes learning environments. The words used to describe movement, ability and value can either reinforce hierarchy or invite inclusion.

Teachers are encouraged to reflect on:

How ideas of "clean", "correct" or "basic" are framed

Whether uniformity is prioritised over musical intention

Who is positioned as an authority, and why

Decolonising practice involves questioning inherited teaching habits and recognising how power operates in the studio. This does not mean abandoning structure or rigour, but rather examining whose standards are being upheld and whose experiences are validated. Creating space for dialogue, curiosity and reflection supports learners to engage critically and confidently with the form.

5. INCLUSIVE AND ETHICAL TEACHING PRACTICE

Inclusive practice recognises that dancers arrive with different bodies, backgrounds, access needs and relationships to rhythm and music. Equity-focused teaching does not assume a single pathway or outcome.

Principles of inclusive practice include:

- Multiple ways of learning (aural, visual, kinaesthetic)
- Clear structures that support choice and agency
- Respect for cultural ownership without gatekeeping
- Transparency about what the teacher knows — and what they are still learning

Ethical teaching values care, consent and responsibility alongside artistic development.

6. PAYING, CREDITING, AND WORKING WITH ARTISTS

Decolonising tap dance also requires attention to labour, credit, and exchange.

Good practice includes:

Paying artists fairly for teaching, consultation and performance

Crediting lineage, mentors and sources accurately

Seeking permission before reproducing material learned from others

Avoiding extractive practices where cultural knowledge is taken without recognition or reciprocity

7. REFLECTION AND LOOKING AHEAD

This document is intended as a starting point. Decolonising practice is ongoing and reflective.

Teachers are encouraged to continue learning by:

- Engaging with artists and educators rooted in tap lineage
- Attending workshops and listening across generations
- Reflecting on their own training

Further development of this work — including expanded guidance, consultation and professional development — requires time, care and resourcing.

By engaging thoughtfully, teachers contribute to a dance sector that values cultural integrity, equity and the living histories carried through tap dance.

GLOSSARY:

Displacement
Refers to the forced or pressured movement of people away from their homes, lands or communities. In historical contexts, this often occurred through colonisation, enslavement or conflict, resulting in the significant disruption of cultural practices and community continuity.

Forced migration
Refers to the involuntary movement of people from one place to another due to coercion, violence, enslavement, environmental crisis or political pressure. The transatlantic slave trade is one of the most significant examples of forced migration shaping the cultural landscape from which tap dance emerged.

Cultural suppression
The deliberate or systemic limiting, erasing or devaluing of a group's cultural practices, languages, identities or forms of expression. In the context of tap dance history, cultural suppression includes the marginalisation of Black American artists and the separation of tap from its jazz and African diasporic roots.

Decolonial theory
A field of thought and practice that examines how colonial histories and power structures continue to shape knowledge, culture and institutions today. In dance education, a decolonial approach involves critically reflecting on whose histories are centred, whose are marginalised, and how teaching practices can become more historically informed, equitable and culturally respectful.

Lineage
The passing of knowledge, style and practice from one artist or generation to another, often through direct teaching, mentorship and embodied exchange rather than written documentation. In tap dance, lineage is central to understanding how rhythm, musicality and cultural values are transmitted and preserved.

Oral Transmission
The passing of knowledge, practices and cultural traditions through spoken communication, demonstration, observation and embodied learning rather than written notation or formal documentation. In tap dance, oral transmission has historically been central to how rhythm, repertoire, musicality and stylistic nuance are shared between dancers and musicians across generations.

Cultural Appropriation
The use of elements from a culture — particularly from historically marginalised groups — without appropriate understanding, credit, consent or respect for context. In dance education, this can occur when movement practices are taught or presented without acknowledging their cultural origins or the communities who developed them.

Call and Response

A rhythmic or musical exchange in which one dancer or musician offers a phrase and another responds. Rooted in African diasporic traditions, call and response is a key structural and social principle within tap and jazz practices.

Improvisation

The practice of creating movement spontaneously in response to music, rhythm, or other dancers. In tap dance and jazz traditions, improvisation is a core skill that supports musical listening, individual voice, and shared rhythmic dialogue.