



Sometimes, the problems that need to be addressed are not visible:
How professional dancer Scott Doherty's use of rhetoric teaches
dancers that changing their mindset can lead to improvement.

A. Silva

1. Think of any famous sports movie that you've seen- Rudy, The Blind Side, Invincible. All of these movies have a coach or mentor who is able to inspire a struggling athlete. This person helps the athlete become the successful person they want to be. For me, that person is Scott Doherty. I started competing when I was eight years old and while I was constantly improving and doing well at competition, I was not at the level that I wanted to be at. Four years ago, Scott came to my dance studio and helped my teacher prepare us for a competition. Within those few weeks I changed as a dancer. Despite having had many amazing teachers who have helped my dancing on a physical level, Scott was able to change my mental state when it came to dance: he changed the way that I thought about practicing, helped me learn how to mentally prepare for competitions, and most importantly he is continuing to help me gain confidence.
2. Scott was a competitive Irish dancer for many years. He won the world championships in 2009 and then moved on to perform with many Irish dance shows including Riverdance, Lord of the Dance, and Celtic Fyre. He created two of his own shows and is now starting his own company that provides motivational workshops for dancers. As a way to promote his new motivational dance workshops, Scott posted videos of him giving a motivational speech on his Facebook and Instagram pages.
3. When Scott first came to my studio, he was a guest instructor, but then ended up becoming a full time teacher for a year.

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Throughout that year my dancing skyrocketed; I started dancing better and placing higher, but most importantly, I was becoming more confident in myself. It has been over a year since he stopped working at my studio, but he still has a major impact on my dancing career, as I am still in contact with him and talk to him whenever I get overwhelmingly nervous before a competition. For example, last summer I had a very big competition that I was nervous about, so I texted Scott. He helped me get in the right mindset for the competition and the few weeks of classes leading up to it. Every dancer with whom he talks has said that Scott has made just as big of an impact on their dancing careers as he has on mine. Many teachers have told their students to work harder and believe in themselves, but what is it about Scott that makes him help so many people?

4. An aspect about Scott's motivational speech is that he appeals to pathos by constantly giving positive reinforcement. As a dancer, once you reach a certain level, many teachers stop complimenting you; if you fix a correction, they move on to the next correction. Teachers are so focused on fixing what is wrong that they often forget to notice and point out what dancers are doing right. But Scott does not own a studio, and therefore does not have the same responsibilities that the main teacher has to make every one of the dancers look perfect. For example, in a video posted to his instagram he encouragingly tells ballet dancers, "The fact that you guys are already this good and you're not even maxing out and you know that you could be working harder, that should excite you" (11 March 2021). He compliments dancers to encourage them to keep trying.
5. However, this method of teaching is not always effective. While some get motivated by compliments, for others it does nothing. For me compliments are not what gets me to try harder; I appreciate when my teacher says that I did a nice move or I fixed a correction, but it does not have an effect on my dancing at large. Last summer, when I texted Scott before my competition he said, "But I also understand. You want to continue to improve no matter where you are." He realizes that just telling me that my dancing is good is not going to be enough for me. Pathos only works if you let it. People can give compliments but if the person receiving them does not agree with what they are saying, then it will not motivate them. So, while pathos is an effective tool for some people, it is not necessarily

what influences the large number of dancers with whom Scott talks.

6. Another aspect that makes Scott's motivational speeches effective is his use of ethos. Scott has been through all of the ups and downs of competing, and he did it at an older age than most dancers. This makes him credible. Many Irish dancers who become professional performers or teachers start at a very young age. Most are from Ireland where their family has been Irish dancing for generations, and are taught by world champions with the same background. They start dancing and competing as soon as they can walk, so by the time they decide to perform or teach, they have multiple world titles and connections. However, Scott didn't have this. He says, "If I, Scott Doherty – some random kid from Lawrence, Massachusetts – can do it, then you absolutely can too" (23 March 2021). Even though great dancers come from all over the world, living in an environment where Irish dance is popular can help a lot. Scott also did not start doing well until after high school. While he did win titles and qualify for big competitions, he won by default; he didn't win because of talent or hard work, but because he was the only one in his competition. Unlike some world champions who develop their talent early, Scott says, "Growing up, I was a terrible Irish dancer. Like, awful. I am not a naturally good Irish dancer" (23 March 2021). This gives hope to all of the people who did not grow up in the intense Irish dance world. Therefore, people who did not start dancing until they were older or who had a hard time moving up can hear Scott's advice and connect to it more than they can with the advice from the ten time world champion.
7. When he gives critiques, Scott always keeps the dancer's immediate goals in mind which adds kairos to his speech; he knows if a competition is coming up and makes sure that what he is telling them can be fixed by then. When I talked to him last summer, I was worried about not improving enough before my big competition, and Scott texted me "you're not going to change the world or your entire dancing style in these next few weeks. So don't feel like you need to. Keep your head down. And make the little adjustments you can." Since Scott knew that the critiques I was worrying about would not change immediately, he suggested that I wait until I had more time to focus on those critiques and, instead, spend my time working on what I could realistically improve. When Scott told his story about what it took to win the World Championships, he said,

“I was lucky enough to win the world championships because that hard work compounded over years” (23 March 2021). Many critiques that dancers receive cannot be fixed overnight. For example, when teachers overload the students with corrections at the last minute or tell them they should have practiced more, students get overwhelmed because they know that they will not be able to correct these things in their very limited amount of time. Instead, the appropriate timing of Scott's critiques allows the dancer to be the most productive. He makes sure that they are still improving, but also keeps their mental state in mind.

8. Beyond good kairos, something that Scott does well is connecting to his audience. Scott realizes that every person is different and needs to be taught a different way. Whether he is talking to one person or a big group of people, he finds a common characteristic between them and focuses his speech around that. When Scott is talking to a group of ballerinas he says, “Especially girls, you're taught, in the world, to be perfect” (14 March 2021). Specifically stating a common characteristic makes the female dancers feel addressed and connected to what he is saying. Usually motivational speeches can be very generic, so people often have a hard time truly believing them. However, when a speech is focused on its audience, people have an easier time believing in and relating to what is being said.
9. When Scott is speaking to one person he focuses his speech even more. For example, Scott has coached me for four years now, so he knows what he can say to me to be the most effective. I do not like sugar coating and prefer when someone gives me a direct, honest answer when it comes to my dancing. I can also get very stuck in my head. Scott knows this about me, so when I was panicking about a competition he said, “you're setting yourself up for frustration,” and “you've gotten addicted to that feeling. So it makes sense that you're craving it and disappointed when it doesn't happen.” These statements were able to get me out of my head. Instead of giving me the usual compliments and praises that people give when trying to make someone feel better, he calls me out and says that I am creating my own problems. He focuses on his audience and says what he knows would help.
10. The most effective part of Scott's speeches is the interaction

he has with the audience. When Scott is talking to the ballet dancers he says one word that makes such a huge difference, “Why?” (11 March 2021). It sounds silly, but this is the word that completely changed my dancing. During one of my first classes with Scott, I did my routine and when I finished he asked me if I gave my 100% when I danced. I gave an honest answer which was no, and he asked why. At that moment, I realized that I had no good response. I could say that I was tired, or that I messed up, or I was nervous, but thinking about those answers made me realize how stupid they sounded. Since then, every time I dance, I give it my 100%. My 100% changes each day, based on what is going on. I might not be feeling well, or was up late doing homework, but I always do as much as I can based on the situation that I am currently in.

11. Even after years of working with Scott, he still asks me “why?” Sometimes he is asking about a physical aspect of dance such as why I am falling out of my turns. Other times it is about a mental aspect, like why I am convinced that I am going to mess up a routine that I have never messed up before. A lot of teachers just yell at their students when they do something wrong, but that is not always effective because students either do not pay attention or do not fully understand what they are supposed to do. When Scott asks “why?” he encourages the dancers to reflect on their dancing and basically allows them to correct themselves. In dance, mental ability is just as important as physical ability and people cannot improve their mental ability if they do not believe what they are being told.
12. While Scott has been able to help a number of dancers, there are mental and physical constraints that impact how effective he can be. When Scott tells his competitive story, he says, “I promised myself from that day forward, every single time I danced, I would try as hard as I possibly could” (23 March 2021). Young dancers might not realize that they are not trying as hard as they can: they have had less time to experience their different effort levels in dance, so they do not realize that they have more effort to give. There also might be an older dancer who understands that they need to try harder, but does not know how to convey that. If they do not know how to put more effort in, then a motivational speech will have no effect on their dancing ability. Dancers also need to be at a certain mental level. As Scott said, “I wasn’t going to work on it til I believed that it was possible” (11 March 2021, my emphasis). In order to make

a change in their dancing ability, dancers need to have confidence that they can do it. If they doubt themselves, then they are holding back their effort. This means that mentally they are not able to give their 100%.

13. I have been privileged to work with many amazing teachers in my life, but none of them has had an impact on me the way that Scott has. Dance teachers are known for having strict and harsh teaching styles. Many teachers believe that that is the best way to get improvement out of their dancers, and they focus on improving what dancers are doing wrong right in front of them. But sometimes, the problems that need to be addressed are not visible. I had amazing dance teachers that made it possible for me to improve my dancing ability tremendously leading up to when I met Scott, but there was still something holding me back from achieving my goals. He saw potential in me and taught me not only how to bring that out, but also how to see it myself. When Scott teaches, he focuses on the aspect of dance that people do not always see; he makes sure that dancers have the right mindset.

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Instructor: Ari Corriadi Ph.D. (Instructor)

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