

## EDUCATION FOR THE COMMUNITY IN DANCE AND MUSIC TODAY

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### ABSTRACT

*The creation of a stage performance with students is, first of all, a matter of communication. This collaborative work of creation, teaching and learning specific art techniques is an essential part in the field of art as well as a challenge for academy and university teachers. In this article we describe from different points of view, how students could become familiar with a multitude of innovating techniques and procedures of form and artistic language by preparing a stage performance in the community. In the following article the choreographer and dance teacher Nicoleta Demian (N.D.) and the musician and music teacher Ulla Levens (U.L.) dispute the topic 'aesthetic education' by responding to four questions in common with a view on their individual fields of working with students in art.*

### Keywords:

*Art education, learning experiences; artistic creation; group improvisation; interdisciplinarity as a cognitive tool.*

### INTRODUCTION

Technically, a stage production of a dance performance is an integration of sound, rhythm, space, movement and image. All these technical characteristics could lead to the discovery of new educational perspectives in teaching and learning music and dance today. Music and dance, as well as visual techniques, are means to focus the connection between art and digital power of the present. The challenges are, on the one hand, to find out how a musician and a choreographer could use specific art techniques to represent and to transmit ideas, emotions and artistic images. And, on the other hand, to choose sufficient conditions for achieving relevant art education for the community. Based on collaborative working, a musician and a choreographer have created stage performances alongside their students focused on the discovery of new

educational perspectives in teaching and learning music and dance through a stage production. Students will gain a deeper understanding of the history, culture, and artistry of music and dance, and teachers develop innovative and effective teaching practices that meet the needs of diverse learners. Working together, students develop a sense of respect for the other arts implied in building the performance. They understand and appreciate the importance of studying with people from different backgrounds but with the same passion for art and the same desire to find their own artistic path. All these contribute to a sustainable future development of the field of education for community.

### **1) What does aesthetic education mean for You as artist and teacher?**

**N.D.**: As an artist and dance teacher, for me aesthetic education means the development of a student's ability to appreciate and critically engage with the elements of beauty and artistic expression in various art forms, including dance. It involves not only understanding the technical aspects of dance but also the emotional and sensory experience that it evokes in both the performer and the audience.

In an article entitled *Art as Action or Art as Object? The Embodiment of Knowledge in Practice as Research*, the dance researcher Anna Pakes (2004) argues for an expansion of what is generally thought of as knowledge beyond the “traditional deductive or inductive logic grounding scientific thinking” to also encompass “practical reasoning” and consider “other thinking processes and forms of knowledge as equally rigorous though they do not conform to conventional logical models” (pp.5-12). Dance is perceived as a sign system, which is also a medium of nonverbal communication. With its means of communication, dance can tell us a lot about society as a whole and its transformations or meanings.

For a future professional dancer, attending different dance performances, including different styles, cultures, and time periods, observing the choreography, music, costume, and light design, and reflecting on how the different elements work together to create meaning and convey emotions, are relevant and inspirational ways to learn about the art of dance.

Aesthetic education includes researching the history and the cultural context of different dance styles, studying the biography and philosophy of notable choreographers, dancers, and scholars, and analyzing the pedagogical approaches and methodologies of different dance schools and institutions.

**U.L.**: Art means for me spaces of expression, which are open for individuals as well as for groups. Open spaces also do exist beyond of theater and concert stages, museums and exhibition rooms. To fill these spaces with life, to use them for self-expression related to affairs, are challenges for the artistic vocational (professional) training. Every human being is creative. For music students the perception of and the

confrontation with art are central conditions to create forms of art. Therefore, I see one of my tasks in supporting music students who will become music teachers in their creativity, so that later they will be able to transmit their experiences to music learning groups at schools. Therefore, aesthetic education has to be a central pillar in the training of musicians and music teachers.

As a musician I am an artist, when I interpret compositions on stage as well as when I improvise my own music while performing. As a music teacher I am a kind of 'obstetrician': I have to communicate art and I have to motivate and to give impulses to the students as future music teachers to perceive and to discuss art forms as a whole and in its parameters. Just these experiences lead to ideas and suggestions, which will create new forms of art. New art objects and performances can be built individually as well as in communities.

## **2) What importance does aesthetic education have in Your method of teaching students (and scholars)?**

**N.D.:** Aesthetic education is crucial in my method of teaching dance students and scholars because it helps them to develop a deep appreciation as well as an understanding of the diversity of art. By teaching students about the history, culture, and context of various dance styles, they gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the art form. Additionally, by emphasizing the importance of aesthetics, students are encouraged to use their own creativity and expression, which will enhance their performances.

Being involved in various interdisciplinary projects, my students discovered that communication and interdisciplinarity help break down barriers and pursue their talent. We collaborate with dancers, choreographers, and educators from different backgrounds and expertise. Engaging in dialogue, exchanging ideas, learning from each other, students, and teacher as well, discover that developing scientific thought in current practice implies the production of original dance language, which arise from a specific interdisciplinary art education. These concepts start from the idea of the synthetic perception of textual and contextual planes of dance, with clear differentiation of dance components (kinetics and rhythmic) and their integral parameters. This approach has the consequence of expanding the aspects of perceiving the mutual relations between the dance text and the context, which directly contributes to the educational goals and broadens our understanding and network.

**U.L.:** As a music teacher in retirement, I focus now 30 years of teaching students in the music department of the University of Oldenburg. In my music courses aesthetic education has been of great importance. Besides giving violin and viola lessons I worked a lot with groups doing a variety of performances in music improvisation. In the music studies at the University of Oldenburg group improvisation is one part of the

instrumental practice, and it is also included in the intermediate examination of music education.

I had a lot of freedom in doing my way of instrumental music teaching so that I chose the topics related to the groups and to the persons I worked with. Also, I worked in cooperation with colleagues of visual art or dance. This I love very much, because it opens the mind for experiences by thinking outside the box. Cooperation in various art forms is also an enrichment for aesthetic education.

Often, I looked for practical uses of group improvisation i. e. art exhibitions or music lessons at schools. For my students it has been very useful to cooperate with primary school teachers, to go into classrooms and to work with larger groups of primary scholars. The music room of a primary school in Germany is often well equipped, so that you will find the necessary indoor space and also the suitable musical instruments (mostly Orff-instruments) for creating art with a heterogeneous community of kids. This is a joyful way for scholars and music students as future music teachers of learning music together.

**3) How do You attain openness and a feel (or perception) for aspects of art? Please give examples of Your teaching practice.**

**N.D.:** Attaining openness and a feel for aspects of art requires the willingness to explore and experiment with different artistic forms and styles. As a dance teacher, I encourage my students to explore various forms of movement and expression, both within and outside of dance. I also encourage students to attend performances, exhibitions, and other art events to broaden their exposure and understanding of art. Some examples of my dance teaching practice include incorporating improvisation exercises to encourage creative expression, using music and visual stimuli to inspire movement. Since 2017 I have redesigned the stage of my dance performances under the influence of digital technologies, so dance fundamentals – body, space, movement – are redesigned emphasizing reality, identity and transformations of the actual world. Combining dance and visual art techniques, the multimedia dance performances became experiments which lead each dancer to find his/her own answer to the physical, mental, intellectual and communication challenges, embodied in an act of artistic creation influenced by the video projections. Transforming the dance performance into a multisensorial experience, choreographer, dancers and visual artists explore and discover a common flow of projected image and dance in order to transform the stage into a specific space in which new means of expression are being experimented. Our projects seek to demonstrate how collaboration and interdisciplinarity do make art education relevant to the dance and visual art students' community. [cf. multimedia dance performance *Diverse Dimensions* (2017), *The*

*Geometry of Echo* (2018), *The Pulse of the City* (2022) in collaboration with multimedia and visual artists from Cluj.]

Taking into account the technological progress and, following the digital explorations in the art of dance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I exploited the relationship between dance and music on the one hand, and between dance and image, on the other hand, in another project, *Disdance*. It was about online music and dance improvisation sessions, a collaboration with *TonArt Ensemble Hamburg / Germany*, and it took place between April and June 2020 on the online platform Zoom. In the 2020 *Disdance Project* our work was to explore, to discover, to experiment, to optimize sound and movement quality. Working together, we gave impulses to each other, found a flow for the dancer and the group of musicians, and we discovered that online improvisation developed its own aesthetic rules and staging tools. In the next year, reflecting on my own practice and experience, I evaluated the strengths and weaknesses, goals, and values of remote artistic work. Engaging students in critical discussions about the aesthetic and emotional impact of our online dance performance, we decided to experiment again in *Disdance 21 Project*, a music and dance online performance based on improvisation techniques. We therefore practiced different teaching strategies and choreographic techniques, incorporated improvised music and new technologies, students did feel encouraged to experiment with improvisation, collaboration, and self-expression. Such interdisciplinary approaches, and diverse perspectives became an important factor in building a community among the students and artists involved.

**U.L.:** Group improvisation is a method which leads directly to the examination of art by doing art in communities. Concerning the playing rules there will be a lot of possibilities, so that different stimulations can be used i. e. verbal instructions, lyrics, graphics, photos and/or pictures, video clips. In short exercises I transmitted working with music parameters as basics. For acting as a team, it will be very important, to listen to the results of every musician including the playing person.

It is also important to begin and to find an end together, a frame within sounds will emerge. In this unique process of creation every improviser should feel every co-musician while playing or not. Also, the improviser should feel himself as an equal member of the community. Only with this experience every student can act as an individual inside the community, doing art together as well as practicing and taking responsibility for the process and for the result of music. Only then the community has the chance to come into a flow while doing art in common. This will be absolutely great for the individuals as well as for the group. Only then aesthetic education will be successful.

I remember very well a working process with music students on the stage of the University aula in 2016. It was carried on during a cooperation with the dancing teacher

Daniel Jüdes. With a group of 15 music students, who would become teachers, we worked on the graphical noted piece 'Bindfaden' (string), composed in 2013 by Violeta Dinescu. The composition, based on her work 'Bindfaden' (2008) for flute and piano, is ideal for performing with groups (students, scholars) but because of the open instrumentation and the impulses setting notation. Our focus laid on the process of creating a performance with music and dance. A work in progress presentation of the result took place within a small group of students and the composer Violeta Dinescu.

The score of 'Bindfaden' is a beautiful drawing in which one can also read a few music notes with different dynamics. An inscription on a table is also to be seen. The piece dealt with a fire extinguisher, the written text is the operating instruction of how to use this apparatus in case of fire.

We worked with two smaller groups of students: the musicians were led by Ulla Levens, while the dancers by Daniel Jüdes. Our method was improvisation. While the dancers worked on body movements to represent different qualities of flames, I worked with the musicians with a variety of instruments on the process of burning wood interpreting the graphic fragments in the score of 'Bindfaden'. Some vocalists worked on the expression of fear and on the recitation of the inscription.

During the next meeting with the whole group, we first took some agreements concerning the musical process and the body movements. One of the students wanted to play a solo with her tenor saxophone to express the extinguishing of the flames. Then we rehearsed the complete performance. After some corrections we invited Violeta and some students to be present at our performance. The audience enjoyed the process of improvisation, where the two groups have been acting with one another. Afterwards Violeta went on stage to meet the students, congratulated them, and talked about the impulse giving story of this piece. Dancers and musicians were very content with their art performance. The soloist student Marlies Lehmann, who had been practising in traditionally noted music, underlined the new improvisational experience with her instrument. The open space with its special atmosphere of community helped her a lot to play freely on the tenor sax, which had not been her mainly studied instrument. She also mentioned the fruitful combination of music and body movement that allowed scholars who did not dare to play a music instrument in the class community to be able to join by exploring body movements.

For all of us presenting our art work to a small sophisticated audience and to the composer was more valid than an aula full of enthusiastic applauding people.

**4) Which strategies might help strengthen the position of art education within the community and the whole society?**

**N.D.**: Dance education starts by finding answers to the following questions: What is a dance performance? How is such a performance built? Who are the participants in the whole process? What role does dance play in a given socio-cultural environment?

For today dance creation and teaching as well, I think it's necessary to widen the educational resources, to build on the effective communication management, on the psychology of creativity, on information technology, in order to find out new methods for new pedagogical needs. By means of interdisciplinary projects, I propose re-new versions of learning in dance education. In the interpretation process, the dancers became aware of the structures and grammar of the body-space-time-related actions and their variables. Simultaneously, the interdisciplinary working process reveals the dancers' knowledge with their personal skills. An interdisciplinary project not only connected specialists and students from different art programs and from different universities but also created a familiar educational environment where students could explore and develop their highest potential. While university curricula provide specific art education, interdisciplinary projects offer professional guidance to the students involved. Making sure that all work together toward the same goal, they form an artistic community. Upgrade the art education knowledge, enhance of aesthetic awareness among students and teach them to accept different opinions and points of view, contributed to boost engagement and interest not only in the activities of a specific project but also to augment academic success. Beginning as an extracurricular activity, multimedia music and dance performance projects represent a framework for developing the students' passion for (their) art.

**U.L.**: As a musician I am transmitting art. I now work with musicians in places outside the music community of the University. My concerts and performances are still art education, but in another context. Now I address my art to the city and its inhabitants and its visitors. I want them to feel the creation of music. I want them to follow the processes of soundings to understand what the language of music wants to tell them as individuals and as a society. It is the language of peace, nature, and love.

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