

## **Ballet Educational Academic Model. Advocacy for an Epistemological Approach**

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### **Abstract**

This paper includes excerpts from the opening section of the author's doctoral dissertation on pedagogical action research, successfully defended in September 2023 at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. The PhD action research conducted an epistemological inquiry aimed at redefining ballet education for the contemporary era. It introduced innovative methods for identifying, analyzing, and rectifying systemic shortcomings within the ballet canon. Moreover, it proposed pathways for a fundamental shift in the perception of ballet, advocating for its recognition as a dynamic field that integrates art, profession, science, education, and lifestyle.

**Keywords:** ballet embodiment, experiential learning, threshold concept, systemic integration.

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### **Introduction**

The pedagogical action research that forms the foundation of the academic ballet education model presented in this document was initiated due to the need to contextualize ballet education within the framework of the 21st century. This endeavor faced numerous challenges throughout its progression, including some of a personal nature, such as the time involved and the lack of a peer and specialist

framework within the realm of ballet research, as well as challenges of an organizational nature, such as discrepancies between the institutionalized structures of ballet's aesthetic movement knowledge, fragmented dance curricula that are sometimes even antagonistic towards ballet, and the absence of systematic structures for the acquisition of ballet knowledge. In this context, during the phases of data collection, theme identification, and analysis, three thematic research spheres were delineated:

1. The first thematic sphere focused on the *optimization* of existing methods and work tools in ballet education and on shaping a fresh framework for acquiring new impulses for knowledge.

2. The second thematic sphere aimed at a reasoned reflection, based on scientific studies, on the role that the art of ballet-specific movement could play *within* the profession and *beyond*, in the cognitive development of individuals and in promoting beneficial societal behavior models.

3. The process of determining the integration of acquired knowledge demanded the establishment of a third sphere of research, inherently linked to the preceding two. This involved the use of suitable tools for identifying solutions and conducting critical evaluations, representing an advanced level of integrating knowledge. Consequently, the framework for an *independent academic discipline of ballet* emerged, equipped to extend information and insights for a novel conceptual and practical appraisal of ballet education.

## Argument

Historically, ballet has predominantly been approached from a practical rather than theoretical perspective, being intensively cultivated as an exclusive art form dedicated to aesthetic movement. This perception has deeply rooted itself within the ballet community, reflected in a diversity of methods for interpreting the ballet canon, and socially, within the public consciousness, often in ways that are not always advantageous. The 21st century, with its expanded potential for knowledge beyond geographical boundaries and known personal or professional limits, presents an opportunity to reassess the overall perception of ballet.

From this standpoint, a more transparent awareness and understanding of the ballet phenomenon as a profession, an educational field, a means of talent recruitment, and a pathway for career transition become attainable. The

identification of problems and the search for their origins have been a lengthy, yet essential, process in discovering and proposing sustainable solutions.

Integrating Kurt Lewin's *Field Theory* (in Saxe, 2010) into 21st-century ballet education marks a profound exploration of the intricate interplay between individual and environmental factors in shaping diverse educational goals. This theoretical framework facilitates a holistic understanding of both internal factors (such as dancers' motivations, skills, and emotions) and external factors (including teaching methodologies, studio conditions, and societal influences). The use of *group dynamics* and Lewin's *three-stage model* from social psychology acts as effective tools for exploration, pointing towards the identification of a previously undefined aspect of ballet education: the absence of a systematic characterization of the ballet canon that fully acknowledges its internal and external relationships. By incorporating Lewin's *Field Theory* into ballet education, educators are encouraged to recognize the complex web of factors that affect dancers' experiences and outcomes.

The connection between Kurt Lewin's *Field Theory* and the *Experiential Learning Theory* developed by David Kolb (and expanded by Alice Kolb) lies in their mutual emphasis on the dynamic nature of learning as a process that is both shaped by and shapes the individual's experiences and their context. "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it." (Kolb, 1984, p. 41) David Kolb's *Experiential Learning Theory* (1984, p. 41) presents a model of learning as a four-stage cycle: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. This model suggests that effective learning occurs when a person progresses through this cycle, experiencing a situation, reflecting on it, forming abstract concepts based on the reflection, and then applying these concepts in new situations. This model also encourages active participation and reflection for both students and teachers, enabling learners to construct their own knowledge and skills based on their experiences. It facilitates learning through converging, diverging, assimilating, and accommodating, each providing a distinct approach to processing and learning from experiences.

Another insightful contribution to learning strategies is offered by Bandura's *Social Learning Theory* (in Kolodziej, 2006). This theory posits that a significant portion of our learning unfolds within a social context, through the

observation and modeling of others' behaviors, a process that does not require direct reinforcement. According to Bandura's concept of observational learning, learners actively engage by observing, internalizing, and replicating behaviors, rather than passively receiving information. A pivotal element of Bandura's theory is the notion of *self-efficacy*, or the confidence in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish tasks. This underscores the importance of mental states and processes in observational learning, such as attention, memory retention, the ability to reproduce observed behaviors, and motivation.

Applying the *mathematical function* tool to discern a method for obtaining added value, along with defining the ballet canon as a system, facilitated the correlation of the conceptual-theoretical ballet system with the physical-practical one. Interrelating systems within the canon opened a new perspective on approaching skills and competencies. It goes about the process of integrating knowledge from concept to behaviour, or better said, how an information can be embodied in a material form. The two systems are related and the embodiment takes place on similar ways as any other processes that can be explained using the properties and establishing the correspondence law of a mathematical function. By relating concept and behavior, the use of the function bridges the gap between theoretical concepts and practical execution in ballet, enhancing the systemic understanding of the art form, providing a structured framework for educators and learners.

The *threshold concept* (Land, Meyer and Baillie, 2018) applied to ballet education led to the recognition of key points in transmitting elaborately and aesthetically embodied movement knowledge. In other words, transformation through ballet education is like passing through a portal, with significance beyond just the physical ones that are apparent at first sight. It redefines perceptions encouraging students to move beyond preconceived notions about ballet, leading to a more nuanced self-awareness and understanding that integrates technique and artistic expression. Transformational learning fosters not only self-awareness but critical self-reflection and the ability to self-evaluate one's progress and challenges. By incorporating these practices into ballet education, students can gain greater awareness of their strengths, weaknesses, risks, and areas for growth, leading to more effective development.

However, the sphere of skills and competencies acquired through ballet education serves a broader group than that strictly of the profession. This detail has

been overlooked by the ballet community and deemed inconsequential. Indeed, viewed solely from the professional angle, the detail may not seem relevant, but from a holistic perspective, it casts the entire ballet education in a new light. It's worth noting here the difficulty of recognizing these nuances, whose existence escapes notice when the perception of the phenomenon is fragmentary, ritualized, and entrenched in this form in people's consciousness.

Yet, not everything that endures retains its value over time. A shift in focus towards perceiving the whole, even if minimal, can act as a conceptual gateway to a new form of a unified interpretation of ballet education, one where a rightful place is found for all those who wish to benefit from the knowledge of aesthetically elaborated bodily movement. Such a vision would be beneficial for the art of ballet in the 21st century, as the selection of ballet dancers would not be made solely through the mechanistic filter of an initial set of skills for the sake of an intangible ideal – the perfection of line and proportion – but organically, based on the redefinition of talent in the ballet profession, whose value is to be tested over time through different filters, approaches, and perspectives.

Exploring the application of Howard Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences Theory* within the context of ballet education emphasizes its potential to revolutionize talent scouting and the identification of diverse strengths in dancers. Traditional methods of talent identification in ballet primarily focus on physical attributes, rhythm, musicality, and spatial orientation, often only to prepare students for professional ballet careers. However, this approach overlooks the existence and significance of varied intelligences that could prove beneficial both within the ballet profession and in broader career contexts.

Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences posits that individuals have a variety of cognitive abilities beyond the traditional scope of intelligence measurement, this means including besides the bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, spatial intelligence and musical intelligence, recognized until now, as the only intelligence types necessary for becoming dancers, also the logical-mathematical intelligence, linguistic intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, interpersonal intelligence and naturalistic intelligence.

The *Cognitive-Perceptual Perspective in Dance Learning* by Thomas Schack (2019, pp. 117-138) highlights various methods for constructing dance learning abilities, such as perceptual information, mental representation of movement elements in long-term memory (the "movement memory bank"), and control of

muscles and reflexes in the motor system. This scientific approach is valuable for dance pedagogy as a testing tool in teaching each dance element, ensuring it is correct and anchored in the long movement memory bank after passing the cognitive-perceptual threshold.

Another perspective from neuroscience that brought its contribution to the action research belongs to Beatriz Calvo-Merino (2019, pp. 193-214) who highlights the unique aspects of dancers' movement repertoires and the interplay between action and perception in dance. Calvo-Merino asserts that dancers possess a common movement repertoire (e.g., walking, running) shared with all humans, in addition to a specific repertoire unique to classical dance. This specialized repertoire enriches dancers with additional movement possibilities, making them unique in their bodily movements.

Furthermore, Calvo-Merino identifies a common space between observers and performers of dance, even if for long time, she says, the action and perception have been considered to be two independent processes in the human brain. Recent cognitive neuroscience research challenges the view of the space where the two senses merge, allowing the field of a continuum between the sense of action (dancing) and the sense of perception (seeing). The congruence between visual and motor responses of mirror neurons highlights a unique aspect of how dancers perceive and execute not only their movement, but movement in general.

### **Methodological Details**

The ballet training system, anchored and fixed in time, has not so far elicited a structured hermeneutic interrogation, nor a confrontation of the conceptual system with the practical, nor of the ballet canon with the principles of movement in general, and still less a questioning of personal development within professional development.

Choosing an epistemological approach for the research was inspired by the positive outcomes of empirical investigations conducted by the author within the *Noja-Nebyla STAGE Education* pilot project in Vienna (2020-2022). Empirical methods of investigation and analysis, individual case studies, interviews, and collective experiments conducted within the mentioned pilot project encouraged the research for a theoretical framework where empirical investigation meets

conceptual abstraction. In this sense, the epistemological approach provided an ideal framework for a profound and robust understanding of knowledge.

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