

Dance, the magical experience of being present

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*"In dance, everything works together: the body, the heart and the spirit."
(Robinson 1992, p. 7)*

Abstract

The aim of this workshop is to provide teachers with an introduction to the world of dance and choreography, focusing on it as a spiritual activity in the sense that it is an effective artistic method for connecting with ourselves and becoming more conscious of the present moment.

The proposal is based on "*Being present*" as one of the key competences to bear in mind in the development of the school curriculum.

Becoming aware of the present means taking responsibility for our actions; improving self-awareness (managing emotions, self-esteem, confidence...) and accepting oneself. It also facilitates and increases concentration and listening, promoting respectful dialogue.

The methodology used is an expressive-experiential teaching approach, in which action-reflection is a key component throughout the whole process, in order to facilitate new didactic proposals which are applicable in a school context.

Keywords: *Dance, choreography, spirituality, awareness, being present, competences.*

Introduction

Dance is art with and through corporal movement that expresses emotions, ideas and stories, or that is simply a manifestation in which the individual gains pleasure from movement. Dance is one of the first artistic manifestations in the history of the human being, as a medium for feeling, understanding and communicating ideas, feelings, situations, impressions, experiences...

Gadamer (1977) defines the cognitive and truth value of art, situating it at the same level as science. According to Gadamer, human truth is too complex to be described through inductive scientific procedures. Art's function is to fill the gap that science

leaves when attempting to describe life and, consequently, belongs to the “sciences of the spirit”. According to the arguments advanced by Damasio (1994) and Pujol (2006), it is evident that art is a form of knowledge and that reason and emotion cannot function separately and must work in unison.

As a professional dancer, I would go as far as to say that when I dance, I have a better understanding of life and my existence. When dancing, it seems as though the present, past and future are fused together. I relate this to the eternal return of the same that Nietzsche spoke of. The fact is that dance is a good technique for learning how to be in the present, since it forces us to pay attention to our movements (in relation to a specific piece of music), to space, as well as to our own energy and that of others. As an art form, dance is creative and also encompasses the spiritual dimension. In this way, art is an instant in which one can discover oneself through creativity. I consider eternal return as the creative potential to assume responsibility for living life to the full in the present moment. “Being present” is a spiritual act since it makes us connect with our true self. In his book “A New Earth”, Tolle (2005) speaks to us of the “inner body” and of the energy that exists within it. This concept, along with the theory of vitalism, provides the basis of oriental medicine. Tolle (2005) talks of the connection between body awareness, the present moment, and healing: *“Body awareness not only anchors you in the present moment, it is a doorway out of the prison that is the ego. It also strengthens the immune system and the body's ability to heal itself.”*

Maurice Béjart, a great choreographer of the 20th century, considered dance to be sacred insofar as all gestures become meaningful, mindful and present. In view of this, dance can also be understood as a spiritual practice. Speaking of humanistic philosophy, Béjart tells us in an interview published in the journal *The UNESCO Courier* (Sommaire, January 1996):

“Martial arts provide us with a way of reintegrating our body in the cosmos. It is not at all about combat or competition, but rather an inner discipline that works to regulate the energy within us. Man is subject to ebbs and flows, to yin and yang, to the constant change from one to the other and from the other to oneself.”

In line with the above, we can say that spirituality is related to dance and to art in general through the creative act.

Dance, understood as a form of active mediation, could represent the kind of “inner discipline” (Béjart) that would help to regulate the energy found in children. We do not need to label all students who find it difficult to control their movements as “hyperactive”. Rather, what we need to do is to find other ways of helping them to control and direct their energy.

Our movement provides us with a considerable amount of information about what we are like, how we are feeling, how we act and how we think:

“Nothing reveals the intimacy of the human being more clearly than movement and gesture. If one wants to, one can hide or pretend behind words, painting, sculpture or other forms of expression, but for better or for worse, when moving we reveal exactly what we are.” (Durán, 1990, 36)

Dance has elements which are corporal, emotional, biological, technical, historical, social, aesthetic, kinaesthetic, affective, hedonistic, commercial, creative, psychic, communicative, and so on. But the element that we often overlooks is the spiritual element; that element related to our conscience, to our level of awareness, and to our connection with ourselves. And this connection is only possible if we honour the present moment. Laban (1978) said that *“one of the objectives of dance in education is to help the human being to discover a corporal relation with the whole of existence through dance”*.

As argued by Laferrière (teacher at the University of Quebec in Montreal), through dance the body is taken as a manifestation of the spiritual dimension and as a way to access other levels of awareness.

Unfortunately, the spiritual dimension of dance is still a taboo, since we are unsure or even afraid to talk of spirituality, in the same way as anything which belongs to the realm of the unknown.

Dance in schools would help to improve levels of attention given to students. We are probably all in agreement that one of the challenges of being a teacher is to maintain and capture our students' attention throughout classes and during different learning activities.

Dance is a practice which specifically helps to develop concentration in a creative and active way. As explained in this article, this is due precisely to the connection between dance and the present moment.

Knowing how to be present in order to learn how to be: nothing appears quite so easy, yet quite so difficult at the same time. To progress and flourish as a person, to vibrate and feel alive.

Objectives of the workshop

The objective of this workshop is to elaborate an educational dance proposal in which students are able to experience and discover choreographic processes through their own body and movement, in order to create, promote and develop sensitivity towards an artistic context. The aim is to experience dance as a spiritual practice, in the sense that it is an effective artistic method for connecting with the present moment.

Development

We consider dance as an instrument for meditating and concentrating, whose practice helps us to become more aware of the present. Working using our bodies helps us to connect with the present and to express feelings and emotions.

The aim is for each person in the workshop to focus on the corporal movement that they produce artistically in relation to the elements of a specific piece of music. Dance will help us to connect space and time (external elements) with ourselves (internal element), becoming aware of our energy, our intentions, sensitivities, postures, rhythm, agility, and so on. In other words, and as Merleau-Ponty (2012) would argue, dance will help us to understand the organic relation between subject and the world.

“Being present” should be considered a key competence to develop within the school curriculum. Becoming aware of the present means taking responsibility for our actions. Being present improves our self-awareness and helps us to manage emotions and to be in better health, improving self-esteem, determination, confidence and the acceptance of oneself. It also increases concentration and listening, promoting a space for respectful dialogue.

This workshop aims to provide teachers with an introduction to the world of dance and choreography (it is an opportunity to experiment at first hand the process of learning a choreography, as well as creating a choreographic sequence), paying particular attention to how to dance; in other words, becoming aware of the present moment. In this way, the workshop participants will be able to extract their own conclusions, which will help to create different teaching proposals applicable to school contexts, developing communication skills, creativity, and critical thinking.

Action-reflection will be a key component of the entire workshop, mainly in relation to the development of the competences, capacities and skills developed through the different activities worked on in the workshop. The methodology used is an expressive-experiential teaching approach, to work on the formation of choreographic structures adapted to music. The simplicity of the steps that constitute the dance and the organisation and development of the group provide the basis of the workshop, in order to develop the established goals.

The activities presented will provide the means by which we will be able to achieve these goals.

Parts of the workshop:

1. Presentation and theoretical contextualisation of the workshop, of the objectives, and of the methodology used.
2. Activities focused on developing each individual's internal corporal awareness; focused on one's own body, instead of on external elements which we are more accustomed to working on.

Activities are proposed to work on different levels of corporal perception, in order to reach an ideal state of calm and internal control to be able to start working with and from one's own body.

The activities proposed aim to raise awareness of the changes that occur in our inner bodies, mainly in terms of the change in energy, aiming to feel how this energy circulates throughout our body.

After the individual work, we will move on to pairwork in order to focus on listening to the body, movement and language of the other. It is important to listen to the other person's body and to accompany it; to slowly fill the empty spaces of the other, respecting each other's turns; establishing a corporal dialogue (giving and receiving, listening and talking with body language). Different rhythms of movement will be used.

The last activities of this part of the workshop will be worked on as a whole group. In this part, we will all move at the same time, listening to our body and to the bodies of the others, in order to establish different corporal dialogues.

3. Activities during which the goal is to capture the external element (choreography) and to interiorise it, aiming to be as precise as possible. It will be important to take into account the different elements introduced during the process, such as the rhythm, the musicality, the steps, texture, energy, dynamic, etc.

The choreography starts like this...

The first eight seconds of the choreography are shown.

It is important to pay attention to the position the body must adopt in each movement. The body is not free now, but consciously directed by us in order to carry out a specific movement.

In order to learn it, different techniques and groupings are used to help all students to learn it.

The aim is to create a climate that helps everyone to interiorise the choreography, in order to endow it with sense, emotion and personal character. What is it I want to say? What do I want to convey? What do I want to give? ...

Different groupings are used to facilitate group cohesion. The aim is to create a shared choreography by working together.

The focus is on becoming aware while teaching. What happens when I teach?

We reach another level of body awareness, and our level of attention and listening helps us to join together in a movement and a language, in order to communicate to the other the sense of the emotion of the art of movement.

We give ourselves time to investigate and work on shared choreography and to experience the pleasure of dance.

4. Final part of the workshop

Reflection and shared analysis of the experience gained in the workshop.

CONCLUSIONS

Within a space of reflection and collective verbalisation, students expressed how they felt and how they experienced greater personal knowledge.

For some of them, this was a unique experience since they had never had the opportunity to experience emotions through dance. They had never danced.

They have enjoyed the work carried out in relation to knowledge of their own internal self and have discovered aspects of themselves that they were unaware of.

They highlight in particular the work bringing together body, movement and dance and the relation with each person's spirituality.

They show surprise at how they have let their energies flow without fear, enjoying the movement and the emotion.

- *“While dancing, I established links between myself and the others, sharing new emotions, sensations...”*
- *“The experience has shown the development of creative, artistic, psycho motor, cognitive and reflexive capacities, promoting greater self-awareness and the potential for communicating with others”.*
- *“Dancing has enabled me to experience inner life; and to be able to look inside myself and at my own body, and to reflect on how I felt and how I came across”.*

It seems incredible that today, after the many educational proposals on dance and in view of its important role in the physical, intellectual and affective-emotional development of the person, it has still not been designated its own space within school curricula. It is through the body that we become aware of what we feel. In this sense, the body is the source of knowledge and of the development of life skills and capacities, from a creative and reflexive learning which takes place from the body itself.

“... it is through dance that man attains his human plenitude due to the singularity of the link between corporal language and the spirit of art (García Ruso 1997, p.39)”.