

## **Adopting holistic teaching strategies in examination-oriented ballet classes**

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### **Abstract**

The majority of Hong Kong students studying classical ballet in private dance schools/studios intend to take the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) examinations. A primary motivating factor for students taking ballet classes and obtaining RAD qualifications is to make themselves more competitive for primary, secondary, and university admission. As a result, passing exams becomes the main teaching objective. As a ballet teacher who values a holistic approach in dance teaching and learning, I have set out to investigate how holistic education affects my teaching practice and how I might shift my teaching strategies in this result-dominated environment. I strongly believe that dance education should and can involve more than skills and the ability to pass exams. I believe dance education should aid a child's development in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. This paper documents my experiences as I attempt to implement student-directed teaching strategies aimed at raising students' motivation and enhancing students' learning experiences. My methodology combines reflective topical autobiography (RTA) and action research in an attempt to share my experience of developing new teaching strategies. It was found that the integration of materials covered in formal school subjects and an eclectic approach in choosing teaching strategies were the most effective ways of achieving a holistic education in my classes.

*Keywords:* holistic education, examination-oriented, ballet, RAD, dance education

### **Holistic approach as a milestone of 21<sup>st</sup> century education**

In recent decades, many educational theorists have been researching and advocating a holistic education, which emphasizes not only propositional knowledge and skill acquisition, but also other generic skills. Learning objectives and learning outcomes in arts education curriculum in countries like the United States and New Zealand have included creativity, critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, and a lifelong learning ability.

Hong Kong is no exception since the implementation of the New Senior Secondary Curriculum (NSS) in 2009. Since then, all students are given the opportunity for three additional years of secondary education, following their first three. The new curriculum is diverse and allows students of different aptitudes, needs, and abilities to reach their full potential. Apart from subjects in the eight key learning areas (Chinese Language Education; English Language Education; Mathematics Education; Personal, Social, and Humanities Education; Science Education; Technology Education; Arts Education; and Physical Education), more subjects are available in the Applied Learning field, thus diversifying the learning opportunities available to students. Dance is included as one of the subjects in Applied Learning. Under formal educational context, five essential curriculum pillars are stated in the curriculum framework for Applied Learning: career-related competencies, foundational skills, thinking skills, people skills, and values and attitude. It is an indication of the migration towards holistic education.

## Why do we need a holistic approach in community ballet education?

### **Student-centered learning**

Education is a human activity in which youngsters are raised to be equipped with essential qualities that are needed in society. Therefore, it is crucial to accurately address students' needs according to their interests and personalities, and respond to social movements such as ideology, political changes, and technology advancements. The essence of student-centered learning theory is reorienting the entire school around the child, which means school curriculum should be determined according to the needs and interests of the learner, rather than those of teachers, principals, school subjects, parents, or politicians (Schiro, 2008).

The following themes are important for a holistic approach:

**Global perspectives.** Education is socially, culturally, and historically constructed. A suitable dance curriculum should meet the following criteria:

- Evolve with social/cultural and global movements and changes, since what seemed to be best in the 2000s may not be best in the coming decades.
- Educate children so that they can develop what is needed in society

Being situated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the age of globalization and information technology, it has become impossible to block ourselves and the next generation from accessing new information; we no longer know how much information we will be exposed to. We must be able to deal with the “information flood.” Educators must prepare students for this challenge, since providing only skills training and gaining propositional knowledge will be insufficient. We need skills to develop our own perspectives on different issues and to develop our own understandings of new knowledge. Thus, the ability to reason becomes the most essential tool for both teachers and students.

***Including ourselves as part of the education system.*** In addition, dance, being a composite art form, is closely linked to different aspects of our daily life, as well as different body movements. Therefore, it is highly related to many subjects in academic schools. Dance allows students to physically experience different cultures, history, and scientific theories that would otherwise be abstract.

As dance teachers teaching in the community, it is important that we see ourselves as part of the educational system. Although the context within which we teach deviates from the formal educational context, our instruction should comply with and echo the rationales of the formal education system. We must believe that through dance, students should be able to get hands-on experience through the utilization of multiple senses (e.g. sight, hearing, touch).

### **Objectives and methodology**

There were two main objectives in this study. First, I sought to investigate how the idea of holistic teaching, other educational theories, and a constructivist approach affected my teaching practice. Secondly, I wanted to investigate an effective, holistic teaching approach with a group of ballet students in a community context in Hong Kong. These goals mean that the study was

very subjective, with the most emphasis put into my journey of discovery (an autobiography of my teaching). In addition to my teaching practice, I included anything that induced reflections and new insights, such as other inspiring life events experienced during non-teaching hours.

I also investigated students' response and progress. The research was thus a multi-dimensional approach that allowed me to explore how theories, experiences, socio-cultural factors, and my own reflections and analysis were affecting my teaching practice, in addition to its impact on students. Therefore, it can be considered qualitative research, using methodologies of reflective topical autobiography (RTA) and action research.

### **Action research**

Some previous approaches were revised and new teaching approaches were proposed and then applied to the target group. Data was collected through video-taping, observation, and informal conversations with students and other teachers. Throughout the project, I analyzed four purposes of evaluation; each time, a new approach was developed and put into practice during the next meeting. The cycle was repeated until the end of the study period.

Typological analysis was adopted for data analysis. The data collected was categorized into the following typologies:

- My teaching styles;
- My teaching strategies;
- Teacher-student relationships;
- My role in class;
- Students' responses.

### **Reflective topical autobiography (RTA)**

#### **The philosophy of RTA**

Being a believer in constructivism, I recognized that I constructed my teaching model from my previous experience, in interaction with the teaching context. I did not mean to reveal the "truth" or form any permanent theories or long-term teaching models. Owing to the interactive nature of education, I was both the researcher and the researched. RTA is based on theories of post-positivism and narrative inquiry. The researcher's story and experience are recorded, thus allowing them to be assessed by the reader. RTA encourages making sense of one's experience and forming theories/conclusions that are specific to a particular group in a certain context and at a certain time. Therefore, it is a reflective and dialogic approach. Because of my research goals, RTA seemed to be the most suitable methodology.

**My context of teaching.** There were 14 students in my research group, aged 14-19. All of them were in local secondary schools, with one of them taking an International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme. They were preparing for their Advanced Foundation and Advanced One Examinations from the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD). The study period was July-August 2010. Students from two different grades took class together as a combined course, meeting a total of three hours per week.

***Examination-oriented environment.*** In a community context, only a limited number of dance students proceeded to a professional level. Students came for ballet classes mostly because they needed to obtain qualifications in dance. They also needed to fulfill the activity hours for their high school curriculum. Two examinations from RAD are scheduled in every academic year. Students took the Graded Examination during May and the Vocational Graded Examination at the end of the year. On average, they only had four months to learn a syllabus and develop skills and physicality for the demanding examinations. This arrangement had determined the examination-oriented nature of the classes.

***Intense time constraint.*** Students had commitments in a number of extra-curricular activities, so the time they had available for dance classes was very limited. Most of them could only take dance classes twice a week. In addition, they also needed to rehearse for performances and competitions.

***Lack of Motivation in Learning.*** In order to accommodate students' desires to take part in other extracurricular activities at schools, the advanced classes were scheduled during late evenings, lasting until nearly midnight. Most students were exhausted when they came; their spirits and motivation were always low.

## **Results and discussions**

### **Stages of discovery**

During the research period, I went through five stages of discovery. Throughout these stages, my students and I sought new teaching and learning strategies and adapted to the changes.

- **Stage of confusion.** This occurred when my students and I were stuck due to the pressure from exams and our tight schedule. We were struggling, hoping to find a way to ease the situation, hoping for more inspiring and fruitful classes.
- **Stage of enlightenment.** I was inspired by different educational theories and related case studies and felt that I had found what I was looking for. Discussions were held with students for a better understanding of their voices and opinions about taking dance classes as extracurricular activities.
- **Stage of chaos.** In this stage, I put new elements into my classes and was trying to adapt to new ways of teaching. Students were trying to explore new ways of learning. It was a very chaotic stage and both the students and I were trying to move beyond traditional teacher-directed learning; we tried to adjust to each other and felt lost. Students failed to respond well in class; they were waiting for answers and direct instructions. This situation was far from my expectations.
- **Stage of illumination.** Classes were cancelled due to school exams. Feeling lost, I had a gathering with my friends and teachers, during which I was advised to design a progressive change strategy. It was suggested that I structure the class with a combination of student-centered learning and teacher-centered learning strategies.
- **Stage of contemplation.** Students started to respond to the new teaching approach and started to progress, and I developed new teaching strategies.

## **Developing a Holistic Teaching Model**

New elements were added to enhance development in the following domains:

1. Cognitive domain
2. Affective domain
3. Psychomotor domain.<sup>1</sup>

### **Cognitive domain: developing students' reasoning abilities**

#### **Integration of materials covered in students' formal schooling**

Interdisciplinary integration serves as an effective tool for developing students' reasoning abilities. In order to draw a connection between what students learned in other academic subjects and dance, students must be able to utilize the following skills:

1. Pick up relevant information learned in those academic subjects;
2. Apply this knowledge in their own ways;
3. Analyze and evaluate their own discoveries.

Generally speaking, this can help in developing students' critical thinking and divergent thinking skills.

During the course of study, I found that such an approach was most appropriate within my context of teaching. Students put a emphasis on their future education; scoring high marks on the university entrance examinations was their main concern. If students were able to improve their understanding on what they learned in other academic subjects in dance classes, they would then be more motivated.

#### **How to achieve this?**

As one example, students were guided to experience action-reaction forces (covered in Physics) through performing allégro, pirouettes, and relevés. I used guiding and probing questions, asking students to figure out whether they were floating up or pushing down in jumps. Most of them managed to state that they were pushing down, even though they were actually thinking about getting up into the air. After that, hints were given to help them to realize that this was an example of action-reaction forces. Eventually, they expressed that they had a much better understanding of the forces, mainly because they were able to physically experience them in dance.

Furthermore, students were also given the chance to apply what they had learned in biology to identify their own body parts and antagonistic muscle pairs. Some somatic exercises were applied in this area to inspire students to use their kinesthetic sensibility. It was believed that they would be able to feel their bodies in this approach and visualize theories in books, going beyond words and pictures.

A more student-directed approach was recommended. Western cultures and the knowledge of history were also included as part of their cultural education. Students were guided to apply

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<sup>1</sup> Development under this domain will not be discussed here.

theories in their own way and to make their own discoveries. Allowing them to develop their own understanding and perspectives is imperative. Guiding and probing questions were found to be useful for such circumstances. However, it was sometimes challenging to get all of the students to work at the same pace. Among those in the class, there were individuals who could learn faster and dominated the discussion. Therefore, as teachers, it was crucial to give all students a chance to participate in discussions.

Students were allowed to develop their own way of solving problems and reaching goals. This is how individuality was ensured in my teaching. Furthermore, I found that students became more aware of how their bodies responded in their achievement of more challenging movements. Self-esteem improved since they thought that they would never be able to achieve those movements due to physical limitations. According to Piaget's developmental theory (four stages of cognitive development), students ages 11 and above may be at the formal operational stage, meaning that some can abstractly reason (Santrock, 2010). Therefore, I believe that students at this stage should be inspired to apply divergent thinking skills and creatively solve their problems and difficulties in their own ways.

Knowledge is constructed, and there is no clear boundary across disciplines; knowledge gained by all means is inter-related. What students learn in other academic subjects can help in building a better understanding in dance, or vice versa. It is crucial to build connections through all areas, and students should be able to gain such skills through dance. This is important for dealing with the diverse types of information that students are exposed to in this ever-changing world. Another effective approach was asking students to comment on others' performance with group discussions and evaluations.

#### **Affective domain.**

The only way to help students learn to deal with different emotions and pressure in a positive manner is to allow them to experience and become aware of them, eventually building understanding. Dance is very effective in this process. After they mastered the movements in each dance piece, I asked students not to think about the left and right. I tried to help them feel how their bodies flowed with the music. They were instructed to pay attention to how their psychological states changed when they danced, and what kind of emotion was felt. If students had difficulty in doing this while dancing, listening to the music without dancing was a good approach. This allowed them to feel more relaxed. Most students reflected that they felt more relieved after the class, could control their anger much more easily, and felt less anxious when they were stressed.

#### **Individualized Learning**

When class hours were limited, students were encouraged to set up their own self-study and practice tasks during the after-class hours. I provided guidance during after-class hours through informal conversation. Individual learning theory was applied. However, there were some difficulties in implementation:

- It was impossible to provide guidance to all individuals and meet everybody's special needs.
- It was also difficult to arrange individual advising sessions for all students since they

had very tight schedules. Most of them could just manage to rush in before class, while some needed to rush to other classes right after dance class.

Therefore, the only way to solve the problem was through informal conversation during their warming up and cooling down period before and after class. From the information obtained, students were guided to identify their areas of interest and develop their own areas of study and practice. They were also guided to reflect on their own practice during class, and identify their strengths and weaknesses. They would work out their own study and practice plan as self-initiated learning. Through this practice, it was hoped that students would become more effective learners in the future.

### **Conclusion**

What has been illustrated above is an example of how a more holistic teaching approach was adopted in a very examination-oriented atmosphere. Teaching in a holistic approach involved more than subject matter; it helped to develop skills such as divergent thinking, problem solving, and collaboration. Education theories and strategies are tools towards these goals. Therefore, discussion on holistic education should extend beyond what is being taught to include how it is taught, and this depends on students' needs, teachers' preferences, and cultural preferences.

My approach is not the best, nor can there be any perfect model. Education is highly context-specific and can never be generalized; no perfect menu of teaching can ever be provided. Multiple models can be effective. Discussions that share experiences help teachers and educators to be inspired for new, effective strategies, hence the need to improve current teaching models.

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