

## **Initiating Aesthetic Learning: A Study on Practicing Dance (Again)**

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**Abstract:** The main purpose of this chapter is to investigate the topic of '(re-)entering dance practice' as a mode of aesthetic learning. Body phenomenology, complemented by viewpoints from performativity theory, will be applied in analysing this process of finding oneself as a person of action in a situation of existential challenge as integral to initiating (aesthetic) learning. More specifically, learning will be described in relation to dance as characterized by the capacity and the will of a person to enter (again) into an emotional, bodily, and social dialogue with her/his surroundings. The data consists of autobiographical vignettes written by two professional dancers and spontaneous, expressive utterances from two 'dance novices'. The utter aim of the study is to contribute to shed light on the potential of body phenomenology and performativity theory in modelling the aesthetic dimensions of early learning in formal and informal contexts.

**Keywords:** initiating learning, aesthetic learning, vignettes, dance exercising, body phenomenology, performativity

**Resumo:** *O principal objetivo deste capítulo é investigar o tópico da '(re)entrada na prática da dança' como um modo de aprendizagem estética. A fenomenologia do corpo, complementada pela noção de performatividade, será aplicada na análise deste processo de descoberta de si próprio como pessoa de ação numa situação de desafio existencial como parte integrante do início da aprendizagem (estética). Mais especificamente, a aprendizagem será descrita em relação à dança como comandada pela capacidade e vontade de se entrar (de novo) num diálogo emocional, corporal e social com o seu meio envolvente. Os dados são constituídos por vinhetas autobiográficas de duas bailarinas profissionais e por declarações espontâneas e expressivas de duas principiantes. O objetivo final do estudo é contribuir para iluminar as potencialidades da fenomenologia do corpo e da teoria da performatividade na modelação das dimensões estéticas do início da aprendizagem em contextos formais e informais.*

**Palavras-chave:** *aprendizagem estética, vignettes, exercício de dança, fenomenologia do corpo, performatividade*

## **Introduction**

To enter the sphere of action by interacting with one's surroundings is fundamental to all learning in its initial phase (Kraus & Herbert, 2012). In this chapter, we will further develop the idea of performing arts, especially dance, as a laboratory for 'initiating learning' (ibidem). To say it conversely: '(Re-)entering dance practice' will serve us as an example for initiating learning.

Our research will relate most closely to Western Theatrical Dance, which combines different dance styles, genres, and even everyday movements, and where dance arrangements may be purposefully choreographed, or the result of improvisation. The notion of dance/dancing refers to an embodied practice of responsive interaction with material and social surroundings, in which the entire human being is actively engaged. Dancing does not only comprise the acquaintance and interpretation of certain bodily mediated features and movements. It is often also coupled with witnessing other people performing and involves relating to the performative acts of others. As a collaborative process, dancing involves an aesthetically reflected exchange of feelings with other people and materials (Banes, 1994; Hanna, 2012). Dance can turn a specific environment into a space for multiple shared experiences. Dance consists of sequences of movements and rhythms, as well as of body forms, to which symbolic value is often ascribed. According to Judith Lynne Hanna, "the most common device for encoding meaning in dance is through 'metaphor' - the expression of one thought, experience, or phenomenon in place of another that it resembles." (2008, p. 493). Correspondingly, metaphors are a way of conceptualizing the different elements and the language of dance. In a creative process of decision-making, stating opinions, creating images and symbolic meaning, as well as by demonstrating and negotiating one's ideas, and responding to those of others, dancing makes use (fewer words, but) of a broad spectrum of embodied action (Anttila, 2018). Letting oneself be affected by the impulses from others, things, and the space around, reacting sensitively to them, as well as demanding one's own freedom and singularity usually requires the full and proactive engagement of the dancer. Also, a vision of community can be created; and a dancer's or the public's sense of community can be enhanced.

Dance in the realm of performing arts, as a theatrical art form requires systematic and sustained practice. It often involves intensive training of dance techniques and styles, mimetic observation of other professionals, routines, memorization, and embodiment. Dance is based on (learning) know-how, also identified as procedural, practical, and performative knowledge. Thus, a heightened awareness of one's own body and capabilities of relating the surroundings to bodily conveyed meaning are the key competences that practicing dancing both requires and enhances. Dance practice also makes lasting imprints on the dancer's body not only as observable skills, but as bodily memories. As Fuchs (2021, p. 9) stated, "the life-long plasticity of body memory enables us to adapt to the natural and social environment, in particular, to become entrenched and to feel at home in social and cultural space." Memory is a decisive element in acquiring knowledge in general. Body memory as a wider notion also counts for haptic-sensual-symbolical, assets-based, and collective aspects of learning (Aebli, 1950). Hanna (2012) points out that creation in dance and the whole pattern of performance, like structure, style, feeling, or drama, involves a broad spectrum of knowledge, for example, concepts of history, movement vocabulary etc. Thus, there is even a conceptual dimension of dancing skills: "Dance creation can in fact only unfold its individuality if accumulated physical knowledge is available as a basis. The body's potentiality thereby becomes a source for, a site or documentation of each of the updates and statements that are made

by the dancing body.” (Cramer, 2013, p. 220). Dancing skills cannot at least function as a site for physical discovery and for novelties.

Thus, dance as an embodied and performative practice has an educative potential that is not restricted to dance techniques, but also involves personal-emotional, material, and social aspects of many kinds (Anttila, 2018). Dancing can be seen as an example of haptic-sensual-symbolical, assets-based, and collective aspects of aesthetic learning in particular, and even of learning in general. Especially interesting in these regards is the initial phase of dancing in front of a public. – Let’s Imagine a stage<sup>1</sup> with a real (or imaginary) public, entered by a professional who returned to dancing after a several years break; or think of a dance novice who cannot refer to any routines and professional knowledge. From both, we are looking for insights regarding the following research questions:

- How to describe a dancing person’s bodily engagement within her/his inner space and with their surroundings? How is communication pursued in a bodily way?
- What kind of learning will be initiated when a person enters the dance scene (again)? How does this correspond to learning in other fields?

Autobiographical sketches (vignettes) of two professional dancers and the spontaneous and expressive utterances of novice dance students shall help us to go into further detail about the topic of interest and provide answers to our research questions. We anticipate that professional dancers have close access to their bodily experiences. They were chosen for both having gained some temporal distance from their dancing practice and then, having returned to it. We expect them to be capable of describing how re-entering the stage provides access to their body memories (see above). For novices, assumingly, dancing on a stage for the first time will be an exciting event that may trigger particular bodily experiences.

### **Methodological and Theoretical Background: Body-Phenomenology and Performativity**

From the body-phenomenological and performativity-theoretical point of view, embodied human rationality and rational judgment are decisive for scientific evidence. Instead of taking causal mechanisms of perception along general abstract principles or arbitrary measures of perception such as generalizability, validity, reliability, uniformity, or morals as measurements for evidence, in particular, the process of a formation of rationality and rational judgment is tracked.<sup>2</sup> The basis for body-phenomenological research methodology is the reference to ‘phenomena’ (Ancient Greek φαινόμενα). Φαινόμενον means ‘something showing itself, appearing’ (cp. Blankenburg, 1991): On the one hand, a phenomenon is something that is merely there and obvious without any doubt, and can be described without any methodical complications. On the other hand, a phenomenon is something that must be revealed, not because it is hidden, but because it is understandable only out of its contexts and from the very conditions of its actual appearance. In other words, phenomenology deals with the things at hand and how they become what they are for us in a concrete context. In both cases, the proper approach to a phenomenon is to ‘describe’, not to ‘explain’ it. Correspondingly, Maurice Merleau-

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<sup>1</sup> By stage we mean a space where others watch a person performing art.

<sup>2</sup> For body-phenomenology, see Merleau-Ponty (1968), for performativity-theory, see Wulf & Zirfas (2007).

Ponty (1962, p. vii-viii) characterizes body-phenomenology as: “[...] a matter of describing, not of explaining or analysing [...]. [Body-phenomenology is the attempt] to give a direct description of experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations, which the scientist, the historian, or the sociologist may be able to provide.” According to the phenomenological perspective, scientific inquiry is modelled as being based on “[...] interpretive sensitivity, inventive thoughtfulness, scholarly tact, and the writing talent of the human science researcher” (Van Manen 1990, p. 34). According to van Manen (*ibidem*), sensitivity, inventive thoughtfulness, scholarly tact and describing talent are not only modes of perception and research, but also central pedagogical abilities, and they characterize learning.

Bernhard Waldenfels (1997) identifies the body-phenomenological standpoint in being ‘here and now’; it is to say: one exists as a living body. One ‘is’ one’s bodily existence. As we are embodied subjects, our response to anything that happens is always instantaneous. ‘Being here’ is synonymous with being a body and with the perception as, and with the own body: Each human being makes up a ‘point zero’ for consciousness, from which specific spatiality unfolds. A person will have some impact on this spatiality even by only being there, or by acting from point zero. This also means that we are never ever completely outside ourselves, even if the expectations of others may make us feel so. In acting, we moreover always depart from our own inner action centre which is situated in a specific set of circumstances:<sup>3</sup> “To be ‘here’ is neither somewhere in a space as a location beside others, nor is it nowhere, away from spatiality [...] to be ‘here’ is moreover a life zero at a starting point for the master plan of space with its directive differences and leeways for movements” (Waldenfels, 1997, p. 195).

Within body-phenomenology, it is stressed that not only perceiving and acting, but also learning starts from point zero in that we never know for certain whether and how we learn something. Käte Meyer-Drawe (2008, p. 77) states: “The ‘How’ of learning retreats into darkness”; “[...] what one wants to see stays invisible [scil. for a direct observance], such as: the beginning of learning, its course, its dramaturgy.” Learning withdraws from observation; we can only see the results of learning. A learner will be exposed (in a kind of passive way) to learning something new. First, s/he will perceive this thing in an innate and spontaneous way and respond to it. Only an instant after that, the learner will actively (and more or less successfully) refer to her/his preconceptions and to his/her former knowledge. In these regards, s/he will ‘encounter’ her/his own perceptions, preconceptions, and former knowledge, instead of simply ‘having’ them. These experiences or preconceptions will or will not come to him/her as solutions for the challenges at hand. In any case, the learner will explore something that s/he does not know yet, s/he may even get to know something that s/he did not think could be the case at all. Within the body-phenomenological learning theory, the existential and hidden dimensions of learning and its power to change social life and the world are in the foreground, rather than its results. Performativity theory would see it the same.

Both from the body-phenomenological and the performativity theory point of view, human activity and passivity are intertwined, i.e., one cannot but actively engage in a certain area as well as behave passively in another area. In other words: Performativity theory aligns with body-phenomenology “[...] in assuming the phenomenological idea of the ‘body as situation’ [...] on the basis of which] a theory of performativity as a twofold phenomenon [is developed]: being passively situated and having to actively take on the situation (Butler, 1986). Subjective or bodily action thereby appears as something of a reaction in which respective norms are reworked or resisted.” (Wehrle, 2020, p. 366). Thus,

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<sup>3</sup> All non-English quotations have been translated by the authors.

body-phenomenology and performativity theory, or approach, can both explain creative processes, inspiration, theory-building as not only being set up in an (active) intentional way, but also involving (more passive) spontaneous, instinctive reactions to something or somebody. Regarding our intellectual life: We cannot only build or comprehend a theory. We can even, in a more or less passive way, experience the formation of theory. - However, the performativity approach goes beyond body-phenomenology insofar as it allows us to reflect on the dynamics of power relations and on sets of divergent, struggling forces that are played out in diverse effective ways. From the performativity-theoretical point of view, theory is supposed to arise not only within the perceiving subject, as explicated within body-phenomenology, but also within assemblages of actors, artifacts, situations, and practices that are thought to be involved in the production of movement, action, and theory: “Assemblages are the actors, artifacts or practices that are intertwined with and co-produce theories.” (Carton, 2020, p. 1417). Involvement into assemblages can be distinctively experienced in dance contexts, insofar as the diverse forms of dance as “[...] practice and performance imply a physical context, a space in which we experience the materialization of [...] theory” (Maar, 2014, p. 108). In her explanation of the formative power of performativity, Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008, p. 36) goes even further by also taking human existence into account: “Performative acts [...] are of crucial importance in constituting bodily as well as social identity.” She continues (*ibidem*): “In so far, [...] ‘performative’ [acts can be identified] as being ‘self-referential’ and ‘constituting reality’”: In one’s spontaneous, immediate reactions to something or somebody, a person will relate to her-/himself, proving the continuity of his/her identity.

### **Method: Vignettes**

Vignettes are a prevalent research method, in particular of phenomenological inquiry (Schratz et al., 2013). Vignette research departs from the hypothesis that a person’s ability to act is dependent on diligently grasping what is happening and reacting/responding to it. Thus, one can act not primarily based on reflection and distance, i.e., not first by explaining the situation at hand from a meta-perspective, but by dealing with things at hand and investigating how they become what they are for ‘us’ in a certain context. Vignettes are supposed to be based on personal stories, within which anthropological specifics, such as frames of mind, attitudes, and feelings, are explained. Anna Bloom-Christen & Hendrikje Grunow (2022, p. 1) highlight the following methodological considerations behind the choice of a vignette for a research project: “[...] ‘the affective turn’ boosted the epistemological significance of vignettes by focusing on how writing not only seeks to transport lived effects from the field onto paper, but how it aims to evoke such effects in the reader.” Thus, a short narrative that serves as a vignette for a researcher is expected to capture how empathy and considerateness evolve in a person. It is thought to give insights into feelings and corporeality. Such learning contexts are our topic here.

### **Empirical Study**

We will refer to participants T.’s and S.’s autobiographical notes. T. is a dancer and scientist (c.a. 60 years old) with thirty years of regular dance practice (both classical and theatrical) before a fifteen-year break. S. is a thirty-year-old professional dancer who was asked to write about her experiences of (re)entering the studio/stage after a four-year break from dancing. We had two more participants: ‘dance novices’ A. and G., two adult

individuals (40 and 60 years old) without dance learning or practice experiences. Their reports are spontaneous, expressive utterances.

### **Dance and Bodily Communication - From the Dancers' Perspectives**

Above, we described a dancing person's bodily engagement within his/her inner space and with the surroundings as a holistic, embodied practice that is pursued as bodily communication. The elements of dance, i.e., the sequences of movements, rhythms, and body forms, to which symbolic value is ascribed, provide the dancer with certain frames of mind, attitudes, and a wealth of feelings that can become part of her/his bodily communication. - T. gives the following hints:

*Dancing means 'traveling' into your thoughts and feelings. It means expressing your inner sensations through your own movement. It means communicating and often being reborn, that is the joy, no matter when or where you're doing it. Dancing makes us feel more complete... (Vignette 1)*

T. describes dancing as an existentially significant encounter with herself. Instead of 'having' thoughts and feelings, she describes that she 'encounters' thoughts and feelings, transforming them into bodily movement. She recounts feeling new, again and again (*being reborn*). The coming out of something new does not appear as puzzling or irritating to her, as one might think, but rather a mere pleasure. She explains that different states of mind, attitudes, and a wealth of feelings merge into a holistic, embodied dance practice. - S. describes her re-entering the stage after a break in her career in a quite similar way:

*It feels like I'm returning to my body. I'm returning to familiar shapes, routes, and movements. To a way of breathing, almost. It feels like returning to someone else, someone I thought I had already left behind. Maybe someone I've never met? I'm approaching her as a human would approach a fox. Carefully, calmly, with no intention to hurt. I don't want to scare her away by being too aggressive. I'm trying to find a way to be friends. (Vignette 2)*

Also S. encounters what she experiences as the wealth of being human. At the same time, she designates a kind of inner counterpart while dancing, which she describes as if it were a wild and shy animal that she needs to tame. While being positively surprised by her own dancing (again) that appears as being most natural to her, she also perceives that she will 'return to familiar shapes, routes, and movements'. On the one hand, dancing seems to involve leaving stuck routines for new experiences, invention, and social interaction (*I'm trying to find a way...*). On the other hand, vignette 2 shows that routines can be essential for dance practice. Here expressed is not least a double movement of looking ahead, seeking new horizons, and looking back. This double movement can be seen as a characteristic of learning in general, especially in its initial phase: One's horizon gets broadened by new (bodily conveyed) content. At the same time, one needs to refer to stored knowledge. T. gives an account for the specific knowledge of a dancer who returns to the studio/stage:

*This kind of knowledge lives inside you as if your body memorizes what was your daily practice over years and years even though you don't realize that this is really happening. It's only when you stop and restart the practice, after a break, that you*

*have this good sensation. This also works with your sight: if you watch a choreographer's work repeatedly, you end up embodying her/his kind of movement and reproducing it. It comes with the job. It all becomes very physical and embodied. (Vignette 3)*

According to vignette 3, dance expertise has once been acquired and embodied through extensive and intensive training. This know-how seems to be accessible to the professional dancer quite easily, even after a long break in practicing dance. - In terms of the social-instructive part of dancing, there is a lack of consensus between the two professional dancers. Unlike T., S. stresses the importance of setting herself free from social, more concretely, from expert expectations:

*I very much wanted to reconnect with dance without all the pressure I used to experience. I was very determined to allow my body to exist the way it is and not try to constantly change it according to someone else's ideals. It felt very nurturing to allow myself to dance with this kind of mindset, more kind and accepting. (Vignette 4)*

Instead of being willing to set herself any longer under the pressure of learning from others and feeling determined by other persons, S. decides to be responsive only to her own dispositions, feelings, and ideas. She stresses her own will and her intentions that appear as being conveyed to her in a smooth, kind and dance-compatible way. Control and restrictions from outside, regarding actions and expression, appear in vignette 4 as interfering with the freedom of encountering one's own bodily coordination and freedom. - T.'s following description of the moment of re-entering the scene is quite opposed:

*I have decided to distance myself from professionally practicing dance and instead think, write, and research. Regretting my decision, I looked forward to returning to studio practice. However, in the moment of (re)entering the dance floor, I was confronted with a lack of routines. I felt insecure, seeking for the once-acquired movement repertoire to be available again. I realized that my former professional and skilled frame of mind had been replaced by more spontaneous, more in-depth attitudes, habits, and initiatives towards dancing. By trying to raise the level of activity, I more than ever before had to, actively, counteract laziness and fear. Uncertainties and difficulties in releasing appeared: my own movements and situational changes appeared not balanced anymore. (Vignette 5)*

In vignette 5, insecurity and, at the same time, a high degree of responsiveness to one's own feelings and actions, to others and to the world are expressed. The reader gets to know more existential topics that seem to pop up in the very moment of entering the studio/stage. Most central appears to be finding oneself as the centre of action, at the same time as the own professionalism seems to be forgotten. The dancer finds herself being confronted with the need for spontaneity and, at the same time, with mixed feelings that appear to have an unsettling impact on her. Instead of praising freedom and responsiveness only to herself, as done in vignette 4, vignette 5 gives account for a dynamic set of inner, not only proactive, but reliable forces also that play out in diverse effective ways. *Insecurity, in-depth attitudes, habits, initiatives towards dancing, but also laziness and fear* are also signs that the body will not be fully subjected to the dancer's own will but be part of a wider-seen materiality. - Fischer-Lichte (2008) would suggest this experience as being a hint to performativity: "The specific materiality of the body emerges out of the repetition of certain gestures and movements; these acts generate the

body as individually, sexually, ethnically, and culturally marked.” (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 36) The person of action describes that she picks up former experiences that she shares with others. Her own body and the bodies of others seem to constitute a kind of assemblage, to which she expresses being exposed, when tentatively finding movements that help her deal with the situation. T. also reflects on the need to withstand her own instincts of resistance (*laziness, fear*). However, social interrelatedness appears to be more supportive to her than being a hindrance, while her instinct is negatively connoted as resistance. - In vignette 4, by S. more or less the opposite is expressed.

How could the difference between what is expressed in vignette 4 and 5 be theoretically grasped? We already connected T.s ideas to performativity: performative acts emerge or turn out as not being fixed. There is no stable identity they could express. T. describes such ‘emergence’, in which certain properties or activities show up in interaction with a wider whole. - How about the inclination described in vignette 4? Fischer-Lichte (2008) points out:

Performative acts (as bodily acts) are ‘non-referential’ because they do not refer to pre-existing conditions, such as an inner essence, substance, or being supposedly expressed in these acts; no fixed, stable identity exists that they could express. Expressivity thus stands in an oppositional relation to performativity. (ibidem)

From this background, we can say that, when speaking of referentiality of dancing according to one’s own will, account is given for ‘expressivity’, and less of performativity. One can read this expressivity in a body-phenomenological way as acting from point zero, from which specific spatiality unfolds. There seems to be a trust in one’s impact on this spatiality by just being there, or by starting to dance. One can decide to develop this in a performative way, or one can follow certain routines.

### **Bodily Responsivity and Learning**

Dance movements are organized by procedural or embodied knowledge that is attained through multiple sensory perception, especially kinaesthesia. As expressed in vignette 3, the primary purpose of dancing may be to provide emotional experience, and to conceptualize it through movement, or to play with movements and concepts. In telling stories through dance, troublesome themes (like *fear*) can be held up to scrutiny. The dancing person can play with them, distance herself from them, and make them less threatening. Dance may convey meaning also through devices and spheres (*the floor, the lights, the music*).

How can such forms of embodied knowledge, such as sequences of movements and rhythms, as well as of body forms, to which symbolic value is ascribed’ (see above), be acquired? What kind of learning will be initiated when a person enters the dance scene (again)? How does this correspond to learning in general?

From the body-phenomenological and the performativity-theoretical point of view, bodily responsiveness and hereto related learning play the prominent role. Dancing is described as ‘a heightened awareness of one’s own body and one’s abilities in relating the surroundings to bodily conveyed meaning are key skills that practicing dancing both requires and enhances further.’ (see above). Accordingly, the expert S. who in vignette 4 stresses her own freedom in dancing, writes about going back to her experiences as a novice:

*The first time I danced on stage alone was when I was twelve. I remember standing in the wings, going over the choreography and suddenly realizing that I couldn't remember the steps. For some reason, I didn't panic or want to leave. I think I just trusted that my body would remember everything. I remember thinking "the stage feels very big" and "I wonder who is sitting in the audience" ... it felt a bit like time was thicker and slower and it moved because I moved. I feel everything a thousand times more clearly: my skin, the floor, the lights, the music, my breath. Everything feels over-exaggerated and like I have zoomed into my body, at the same time in control of everything and not controlling anything. (Vignette 11)*

Memory is supposed to be an integral aspect of learning that relates to movement in a fundamental way; the dancer and scientist Efva Lilja (2018) explains this, when stating:

Movement activates the memory. Movement, touch, the physical experience, lure the memories out of the hiding-place called oblivion. Choreography [here, in a broad sense, the art of arranging or creating dances] relates both to what you have experienced and the impression of the experience. The body is my abode. I move in context. My movement expresses my space and through the body I gather experiences from it. (Lilja, 2018, p. 442)

Here, the belief is expressed that, through dancing, forgotten memories can be activated. In the state of dancing going back to memories, time and space seem to shape up differently than before. The stage appears to a dancer as being larger and time as more compressed (*thicker and slower*) as in the times when being a novice and then a professional. The dancing body seems to become a sensitive wide field, thereby gaining control of the situation, and being exposed to it at the same time. The dance floor, music and light appear as giving haptic, acoustic, and visual hold points. The floor under one's feet and the other sensual hold points seem to make the dance floor a world stage. The time flow will be formed by rhythm, movement, and the force of gravity of the human body.

In contrast, as suggested by S. in vignette 4, the production of movement, action, and theory can also count as voluntary, at least in terms of liberating oneself from the expectations of others. Memories seem to allow S. an approach to dancing. - The descriptions of the two 'dance novices' point to a similar direction: They seemingly try to activate their former experiences in order to be able to reconnect them and to adapt them to new situations. The 'dance novice' A. is reflecting a situation that is comparable to what expert S. expresses in vignette 4:

*freedom (drew a cross in pink and yellow)/(in)certainty curiosity/I (inside a drawn circle)/relaxation/MY BODY/MY SPACE/MY TIME." (Utterance 1)*

A. has also found out that responsiveness to her own body and ideas can serve her as an optional leeway to dance and, with it, to an awareness of her body, its capabilities and visibility. Her willingness and readiness to explore her own feelings, options of expression and social aspects as being connected to movement are mirrored in her fragmented words. She experiences herself as point zero at which impulses from concrete others, things, and the space around are perceived. From this point of unconsciousness, a response is given to such impulses. In contrast, the 'dance novice' G., as fragmentarily as A., illustrates an existential struggle taking place on the stage (also expressed by T. in vignette 5):

*bare feet/and dirty!!/appropriation of space/unsatisfactory/dependent on/external factors/and conditioned by them/‘+’ sign (with a circle drawn around it) Relaxation/Good response to stimuli/(music known and coinciding with musical taste + indications/suggestions given/Knowledge of/self/body/limitation. (Utterance 2)*

While S. and A. relate more to themselves (see above), T.’s and G.’s experiences of existential struggle on the stage can be interpreted from the background of performativity theory as relating to relational and entangled, emergent, and nested assemblages, from which theories derive. This is in line with Butler’s (1988) idea about performativity: “As a given temporal duration within the entire performance, ‘acts’ are a shared experience and ‘collective action’.” (Butler, 1988, p. 525).

Vignette 8 by the professional dancer S. illustrates how bodily experiences can also be relieved and anticipated, in this case, by dreaming:

*Dancing crept back into my life first through dreams. It was about a year ago [2022] when I had the first one: a dream where I had my old body, the one that used to dance six hours a day and enjoyed movement and music. ... I woke up from these dreams feeling more and more confused, mostly because I had given up dancing and lived contently with the idea that it was no longer a part of my life for four years now. I didn’t even feel like a dancer anymore. (Vignette 8)*

S., after having stopped dancing professionally for some years, envisions herself again as a dancer, now in her dreams. Indeed, bodily experiences and memories can also shape up in dreams. As explained above, from a body-phenomenological and performativity theoretical point of view, it is at first and foremost our body that in its immediateness and authenticity opens to the phenomena of our lifeworld. The body’s mechanisms, principles, measures, prejudices, and biases can also mislead understanding, or they can create a dreamy way of looking at things. We can see that only secondarily, so to say as a result of reflection, drawing to experience, or by education or the like, a more stable orientation can be gained (again). - T. gives us information about how security can be gained on the stage:

*Overall, the dancer, when re-entering the stage, instead of being able to draw on accessible body knowledge, experienced broadening one’s repertoire of moving in the space at hand by getting in real, or imaginary contact with things and other people. One experienced standing on the ground as the most reliable option for existential orientation. (Vignette 9)*

T. highlights that dancing involves, voluntarily or involuntarily, being entangled with others and with their surroundings. The ground under one’s feet seems to be prevalent. A person is deeply involved and nested within a supporting, pre-existing context that s/he can, at the same time, also, at least in parts, produce. However, body-phenomenological approaches usually do not stress the social dimensions of learning. On the one hand, other people are ‘flesh’ according to Merleau-Ponty (1962). People and materiality, in a way, share the same substance. In this sense, both may serve as ‘the ground/as the most reliable option of existential orientation’ (see above). We see in the data that this can be the case when entering a scene. On the other hand, we can only understand others (as being different from us) by trying to grasp in which regards they differ from ourselves (Waldenfels, 1997). The consequence is that the option of existential orientation that is

connected to others is only possible if some kind of dialogue unfolds. T. gives an account of a bodily conveyed communication of a dancer on the stage:

*Of importance is that the one on the stage dares to start an emotional, bodily, and social dialogue with her/his surroundings by means of nonverbal expression and movement. For the dance novice, it will be of help being able and/or being enabled to refer to organized movements that provide messages. (Vignette 10)*

The above mentioned ‘collaborative process of dancing that involves aesthetically reflected exchange of feelings and expression with other persons’ is here explained as something a novice needs to learn. That is to say, ‘sequences of movements and rhythms, as well as of body forms, to which symbolic value is ascribed’ (see above) are here identified as the language for bodily and social dialogue that can be learned.

S. gives an account of her experience of how negotiating meaning can take place between the dancer and the choreographer, ending up with the proposal that it is possible to work in a responsive, equal, and reciprocal way with the choreographer:

*[...] dancing in a new, smaller company and a new mindset- - accepting and supporting asking questions, gave room for a nice dialogue between me and the choreographer. She was willing to change the narrative of that specific duet from a girl literally falling head over heels to two people being curious about one another. I’m not sure if that got across to the audience, but it made all the difference to me. (Vignette 11)*

Here, the dancer and the choreographer negotiate the meaning of the choreography in question so that the dancer can emotionally and artistically relate to the choreographer on her terms. Here, one can see that dancing may be interpreted in various ways, and that also a common interpretation of a choreography can be formed.

We have seen above that an important aspect of dancing is its narrative, symbolic, and gestural aspects, which can be described as metaphors (cp. Hanna, 2008). The senior dancer and scientist T. expresses the inclusive potential of developing dance from metaphors by which one reaches the level of humanity:

*Anyone can experience the same kind of bodily practice as a professional dancer: experience movement through all kinds of stimuli, being exterior or interior sounds or thoughts, that will lead to expressing a physical and aesthetic working language - there is this kind of worry when dealing with performance. (Vignette 12)*

Again, in vignette 12 dancing is addressed as a language that can be developed on the ground of impulses that may come from inside a dancer, or from outside (*kinds of stimulus, being exterior or interior*) in an assemblage of actors, artifacts, situations, and practices.

## Summary

From the background of body-phenomenology, completed by performativity theory, our study has brought about some significant aspects of initiating (aesthetic) learning. We departed from the dancers’ descriptions of what dancing is for them, especially in the situation of (re-)entering a studio/stage. In dancing, the human body apparently becomes

the centre, from which the whole world (space, senses, and time, among others) seems to shape up. At the same time, a dancing person seems to encounter her-/himself as the material for dancing, either referring to their own will and expressivity, or by performativity and emergence when becoming part of an assemblage. In terms of a dancing person's bodily engagement in encountering her/his own inner space and surroundings, we saw a difference between mere pleasure and the experience of the wealth of being human. Examples were given for smoothness and feeling at home (again), or insecurity and uneasiness that need to be met, as well as wildness that needs to be tamed. Less proactive forces of a dancer like physical inertia and fear may appear as challenges when entering a studio/stage. Alternatively, s/he can pursue communication in a performative, bodily way. Against the background of her/his former experiences, the dancing person may either relate to others in a trustful and nested way or may revolt against former social experiences in dance contexts. When distancing from others there is the option to voluntarily let multiple sensory perceptions, or dreams rule dancing. However, dance also allows for bonding with others. On one side, we are connected to others and to the material world by 'flesh', i.e., in a primary way. On the other hand, we can only communicate with others, when we understand and tolerate them being different from us. By the means of dancing, such relationships proceed in many different modes (sounds, senses, thoughts, feelings). In the multimodal process of starting dancing (again), others can be experienced as helpful and supportive; or relations of power can be taken via the different levels of communication. In our data, the most outstanding challenge entering a dance floor appears to be (internal) physical inertia and the (external) judgment of others, which we see as being a characteristic of all learning situations. An important result of our study is that such inertia and judgment in a situation of initiating learning can be processed and overcome bodily-sensually, as well as by intellectual means.

At the same time, the situation of (re-)entering a studio/stage is by all our participants, without any doubt, seen as triggering stored knowledge. It involves the chance to broaden one's horizon by bringing new (bodily conveyed) content in. The procedural knowledge that is needed for dancing concerns the sequences of movement and rhythms, as well as body forms to which symbolic value is ascribed.

To sum up: In this study, we have described learning in its initial phase by its haptic-sensual-symbolic, assets-based, and collective aspects. Such learning derives not only from external, but even from internal impulses. A profound formation of theory and a building of procedural knowledge takes place that contains, for example, concepts of history and movement vocabulary, etc. At the same time, it embraces existential dimensions. - two moments of the existential depth of initiating learning have become apparent in our analysis of the instant of entering the dance studio/stage:

1. Insights into the thoughts and feelings of the active person are given in terms of her/his sensing, listening, and responding. Sequences of movements, rhythms, and body shapes, to which symbolic value is ascribed, are brought forward. We draw the conclusion that by this the will and the bodily disposition of a person to explore feelings and expression, sociality and the material world can be fostered.
2. Human existential struggling can be experienced as relational and entangled, emergent, and nested assemblages of the own self, people, and things, from which theories derive. Sensual hold points (in the case of dancing, e.g., *the floor under one's feet*), social interaction, dreams, metaphors, and the own will can help to overcome eventual initial hindrances and support learning.

Learning, as we see it, is about knowledge acquiring that does not only apply to dance. Dance is much more than a set of steps put together for others to enjoy it and entertain. Learning to dance is, therefore, a complicated issue to think and write about. We are very grateful to the contributions of the professional dancers and the ‘dance novices’ for our research and hope that our text will help others to take a step forward in Dance Studies.

Further studies should investigate and detail the results of this study in relation to learning in general, or to other content learning than dancing. Then, the idea that initiating learning demands a person’s bodily engagement within her/his inner space and with a surrounding at hand, as well as bodily communication could be explained from the viewpoint of other content such as that of Mathematics, Natural Sciences or Languages.

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