

# Fostering Critical, Research-based Dance Pedagogy and Participatory Artistic Practices

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This chapter delineates core values that have shaped the MA programme in dance pedagogy at the University of the Arts (Uniarts) Helsinki since 1997.<sup>1</sup> Although the meanings and theoretical frameworks embracing these values – dialogue, holism and criticality – have become transformed over the years, they are still at work and continue to shape the future of the programme. For the author, these values have supported continuous reorientation and critical questioning of the purpose and practice of dance education. This chapter, written in the form of a critical personal narrative, unravels some tensions and complexities in developing the programme along with these underlying values. Through this inquiry the author aims to connect these values and her journey to the future development of the field of dance education. She highlights the potential of practice and research in dance education in making a difference in the world, in transforming communities towards greater appreciation of difference, and in working for more just and sustainable futures.

Keywords: *Dance education; Higher education; Dialogue; Holism; Embodiment*

## Introduction

For fostering excellence, we need gates. For nurturing diversity, we need bridges. (Anttila 2018/2022, n.p.)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uniarts.fi/en/study-programmes/dance-pedagogy-masters-programme/> (University of the Arts Helsinki 1 2025).

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The above proclamation expresses much of what has become increasingly focal for me in the field of dance education practice and research. This seemingly simple sentence and an attempt to unravel the complexities underlying it serves as a starting point for this chapter, which aims to delineate the more than 25 year-long path of the MA programme for dance pedagogy at Uniarts Helsinki, Finland, of which I have been the programme leader since 2002. More specifically, I attempt to elucidate the development of the programme, illuminate how dance education research has reinforced this development, and sketch some future directions for the field. I anticipate that, along the way, some tensions between personal values, collegial collaboration, institutional pressures, and societal challenges will become unveiled. Thus, gates and bridges may serve as fitting metaphors to start with.

I have approached this inquiry through critical personal narrative, an approach to educational research that I became familiar with already during my doctoral research (Anttila 2003). At the turn of the century, Patricia Burdell and Beth B. Swadener (1999) defined critical personal narrative and autoethnography as emerging genres in educational scholarship, referring to the growing use of academics' personal narratives in scholarly publications (see also Ellis and Bochner 2000). These genres already then drew from critical theories, post-structural forms, and post-colonial themes, and questioned assumptions of empirical authority. In so doing they addressed issues of power and inequity. Burdell and Swadener (1999, 22) refer to it as a form of resistance to othering, and as "a movement away from distanced theoretical writing to writing that details the individual and imaginative aspects of agency." Following Valerie-Lee Chapman (2004, 95), critical personal narrative attends to issues of power and knowledge in practice. While it is about the author, it goes beyond personal journaling. Instead, by focusing on series of incidents or relationships, critical personal narrative seeks to make personal experiences, or I might add, values and views, useful politically. To emphasise the political, I have supported my personal accounts with excerpts from various policy documents, published and unpublished texts, chosen through a process of careful deliberation. Indeed, through this query, my aim is to highlight the significance of personal, shared, and negotiable values in developing tertiary dance education. This personal narrative is situated in time and place, but at the same time connected to broad societal issues, global events, and international collegial connections. Thus, my research question is: how can I connect my personal journey and the core values that have shaped

the programme to the future development of the field of dance education? With this question in mind, I now begin this inquiry with some introductory contemplations.

### **On Bridges, Gates, and Margins**

As long as I remember I have wanted to see talent, or rather potential, in everyone I teach and work with. In the first pages of my doctoral dissertation I exclaimed, “There were so many fascinating areas to study! So, how, on earth, did I find myself again researching dance education in a school context? (Anttila 2003, 8). The metaphor of building bridges so that everyone would have access to dance education has been the backdrop for my dance education practice and research ever since. Paradoxically, at the same time my academic positions have involved participating in various gate-keeping procedures, such as student admissions. I have both covertly and overtly tried to resist the focus on traditional views of excellence as the ultimate aim of higher education in the arts. As a member of the board of Uniarts, for example, I argued against raising the tuition fee for international students from non-EU and ETA countries. This motion was unsuccessful, and the current government of Finland plans to raise the tuition fees to correspond to actual costs – building a formidable gate. When renewing the strategy of Uniarts Helsinki, I proposed that we include a statement of non-discrimination.<sup>2</sup> This proposal was accepted and supports the idea of building bridges – theoretically. While welcoming this small step towards diversity, I have become increasingly and painstakingly aware of my privileged and problematic position in academia. This position involves power, and with that, a possibility, and responsibility, to bring about change. However, I have come to realise that my attempts to nurture diversity have proven to be frail at best. In a panel discussion that was part of a conference on norm-critical leadership<sup>3</sup> I encountered severe critique towards our university, for example regarding our efforts to make admissions more accessible. My interpretation is that Uniarts Helsinki has an elitist image, especially in the eyes of marginalised groups and individuals. What can someone like me, having

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.uniarts.fi/en/general-info/an-inclusive-and-diverse-university/>. The entire strategy can be found here: <https://www.uniarts.fi/en/strategy-2021-2030/> (University of the Arts Helsinki n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> See [https://www.kulttuuriakakille.fi/norm\\_critical\\_leadership\\_conference\\_2023](https://www.kulttuuriakakille.fi/norm_critical_leadership_conference_2023) (Culture for All 2023).

had the opportunity to be educated and employed in such an institution, say about diversity, about bridges that could carry us “to and fro, so that we can get to other banks” (Bhabha 1994, 5, with reference to Heidegger)?

On the other hand, most, if not all, dance educators around the world are working in the margins. Dance education is also undervalued within higher education, even in the field of higher education in the arts, at least in those countries where dance is not included in the curriculum of basic education (Svendler Nielsen et al. 2023). It falls in between, it has no home, and its history in academia is short. It is a nomad, traversing between established academic fields – education, pedagogy, performance studies, dance studies, and philosophy. While its intellectual roots are growing through the work of dedicated scholars, critical questions emerge: where should we turn our attention to in developing this field? What are the urgent questions for us in contemporary times? These questions puzzled me already in 2003:

In the field of dance and art, we may feel somewhat sheltered from this phenomenon of social turmoil and global racing that exhausts even young people today. However, I think that all educators, even in art universities face this issue in a way or another. A dance class or program can hardly be a vacuum. Nowadays it is very difficult not to be aware of the larger world. The question is, for me at least, does learning art require that we turn our minds off these issues? Or can they blend into art, or become art? And, how does our awareness of the larger world inform our practice as teachers? Is it possible to learn “just” art? (Anttila 2003/2020, n.p.)

Since 2003, ecological sustainability, migration, and inclusion, among many other societal issues, have become increasingly urgent. All teachers, therefore, should critically consider why we teach, what we teach, who we teach – and who is left out, what is left out. Whose knowledges and practices matter, and why? Yet it might be easier to redirect the focus when the roots are not so deep, and the burden of history a little lighter. This thought makes me hopeful and encourages me to think that we, as an international community of dance education scholars, may have more potential to make a difference in this world than we may think.

I will return to these contemplations in the closing section of this chapter. Now, I will turn attention to core values that have been significant for me personally during the last 25 years. These values – dialogue, holism, and criticality – have also formed the foundation for the MA programme for dance pedagogy at Uniarts Helsinki. Thus, they are not

solely mine, and have not developed in a vacuum, but in close collaboration with others: colleagues, authors, artists, and students.

### Cornerstone I: Dialogue

I realize now that the core of education is promoting justice. I also realize that understanding and celebrating difference precedes and coexists with promoting justice. (Anttila 2003/2020, n.p.)

Dialogue, understood as an embodied phenomenon that extends beyond verbal language, has been the foundation for my pedagogical practice and philosophy since completing my doctorate (Anttila 2003). Since then, other dance education researchers have continued to investigate dialogical dance pedagogy in different contexts, widening and contesting the meanings of dialogue (Kauppila 2012; Jalkanen 2019; Turpeinen 2015). More recently, Tuire Colliander (2022), in her ongoing doctoral research, aims to develop dialogical pedagogy through post-human thought towards intra-active pedagogy (Lenz Taguchi 2010), and one of my closest colleagues, university lecturer Riku Saastamoinen (2024), applies dialogical pedagogy in the field of theatre pedagogy as he develops an approach entitled performance-based pedagogy.

In my own thinking and practice, the notion of third space, introduced by Homi K. Bhabha (1994), has expanded the scope of dialogue towards a deeper understanding on how colonialism is still at work in contemporary societies, how individuality and identity construction lead towards separation from others, and how difference is often understood as a problem. Difference has, therefore, become a key concept that deepens the meaning of dialogue. I am drawn to a positive philosophy of difference as it strives toward multiplicities and possibilities in life and the world rather than toward negative categorical difference that makes a separation or distinction between things (Anttila et al. 2019; Löytönen 2017; May 1997). While in the early stages of my scholarly path I was not familiar with post-structuralist philosophy, the notion of difference was central in my contemplations regarding dialogical philosophy:

Martin Buber developed his dialogical philosophy during the first part of the 20th century, dreaming about the possibility of dialogue between people from different religions and ethnic origins. Sadly, his vision did not come true. Many of us Finns know how difficult it is even to dialogue among people of the same religion and race. Misunderstandings among persons from similar backgrounds are not rare. Thus, I think it is fair to say that

difference surpasses race, gender and religion, and is a concern for everyone. (Anttila 2003/2020, n.p.)

In today's increasingly polarised public debate and political environment these contemplations still seem very relevant, and, as we know, populist trends divide, rather than connect people even with similar backgrounds (e.g. Rowe et al. 2018). This phenomenon was also focal in an Erasmus+ strategic partnership project, entitled *A Pedagogy of Imaginative Dialogues* (PIMDI) which the MA programme in dance pedagogy participated in. The project aimed to develop a mode of education that takes the tension between incompatible differences as a productive and engaging starting point in order to open up a dialogical 'third space' between them.<sup>4</sup>

For me, pedagogy is about fostering and creating connections. Striving for connectedness extends beyond human relations. It is about acknowledging the presence of Otherness: difference within and around oneself. Dialogue, then, refers to sensitive observation and awareness of invisible and visible connections and relationships. It requires being open to the otherness that lives in me and around me, in other people, but also in my animate and inanimate environment. Dialogue is therefore also the basis of ecological awareness for me. In my pedagogical practice, non-human life and inanimate materiality are increasingly present.

In my view, dialogue is based on relational ontology, where entities come into being through relationships, and where relations between entities are considered more fundamental than the entities themselves (e.g. Bozalek 2019). For me, this means that individual human beings, their identities, experiences, and subjectivities, emerge from relations, that is, what is in-between and what connects them to other beings and things. In practice, dialogical dance pedagogy de-centres the teacher and emphasises the relationships between the students, as well as their connections with their material surroundings. A dance class might, then, involve objects, materials, and texts as partners in dance, and take place outside the traditional dance studio setting.

During recent decades, relationality has, indeed, become a more focal concept in the MA programmes of dance pedagogy and theatre pedagogy. A four-credit course on dialogical arts pedagogy has been in the curriculum since the onset of the programmes. The learning outcomes of the course, since 1997, have emphasised ethical questions involved in human interaction, and a questioning, reflective, critical approach to interaction,

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://pimdi.lhi.is/> (PIMDI 2023).

group dynamics, and the work community, but relationality as a concept has not been mentioned until recently. At Uniarts Helsinki, all study programmes had to revise their curricula to take effect in the beginning of autumn 2024. Throughout the revising process, we, the faculty of MA programmes in dance and theatre pedagogy, felt that the course needed to be revised to account for changes around us. Now, the name of the course stands as *Dialogue and critical thinking in arts education*. The revised learning outcomes include the notion of relationality:

The student is able to conceive art pedagogy as a collaborative phenomenon that is based on relationality. They are able to apply ideas related to dialogue, group agency and relationships in their professional practices. They are familiar with the key principles related to dialogical, critical and feminist pedagogy. Students are able to approach current societal phenomena open-mindedly and critically. They are able to participate in the development of socially and ecologically sustainable art pedagogy. They recognise structural problems and ethical issues related to power and interaction.<sup>5</sup>

This change reflects the critical discourse concerning the notion of dialogue within our faculty, and the growing awareness that dialogical philosophy is not quite enough in tackling the widening societal concerns and challenges of the contemporary world. This new formulation also connects dialogue to the third cornerstone, criticality. This being said, all three values are interconnected in many ways.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this section, dialogue, for me, has always been an embodied phenomenon. Embodiment, quite self-evidently, is, in its many forms and meanings, a core concept for me and for the MA programme in dance pedagogy. In the context of our curricula and studies, however, we have used another term, holism, to refer to the conception of a human being that has been, and still is, central, and which I will describe next. Embodiment is a key element in the holistic conception of a human being, although embodiment has many other meanings, and in all of them is a broader notion when discussed in other fields and contexts.

## Cornerstone II: Holism

By holism I refer to a conception of the human being that is based on an ontological, or philosophical analysis that sees a human being as a

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<sup>5</sup> <https://opinto-opas.uniarts.fi/en/course/T-PB2403/16475>. For the entire, revised curriculum, see <https://opinto-opas.uniarts.fi/en/programme/14207> (University of the Arts Helsinki 2 2024).

whole (Rauhala 2005). A holistic conception of being human departs from the dualistic view that sees the mind and the body as separate. Holism is tightly connected to the so-called embodied, or corporeal, turn that has deep roots in body phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1962/2010; Sheets-Johnstone 2009). The embodied turn is supported by more recent findings in, for example, cognitive science (Damasio 1999; Thompson 2007). If taken seriously, the embodied turn, and within it, holism, has deep meanings and consequences for education, for artistic work among human beings, for all professions that involve interaction with others, and for research. In all, this means greater attention to the senses, emotions, and embodied activities in all fields that involve human interaction.

The philosopher Lauri Rauhala (1914–2016) has significantly influenced the development of the holistic conception of the human being in Finland. His ontological analysis of the human being is a synthesis that draws from other significant conceptions of the human being (Rauhala 2005, 31). According to him, a human being is an embodied, conscious, and situational creature. These three modes of existence are intertwined and cannot exist without each other. They are equally primary and necessary and, by their mutual interaction, function in a complex human entity. This means, for example, that a component of a human being's situation affects both embodiment and consciousness. Rauhala (2005) emphasised that a human being's situation is always unique and that a human being is best understood on the basis of his or her relationship with the world.

The space here does not allow for a thorough discussion of Rauhala's philosophy. Also, holism as a value and as a philosophical tradition has several other roots, sources, and meanings, for example within the above-mentioned fields of body phenomenology and cognitive science, and significantly within relational ontology, new materialist thinking, and indigenous philosophies (Anderson and Harrison 2010; Bozalek 2019; Fenwick et al. 2011; Guttorm 2021). In our programmes and within our faculty, discussions on embodied and multimodal ways of knowing and learning have been focal. Another increasingly significant topic related to holism is students' well-being. Taking into account students' backgrounds, earlier experiences, individual needs, and their life situations has been increasingly important. This discussion is also related to safer spaces, trauma-sensitive pedagogy, ableism and critical disability studies that are current topics of art pedagogical doctoral research at Uniarts

Helsinki (see Jaakonaho and Junttila 2019; Laukkanen 2022).<sup>6</sup> With their emphasis on pedagogical sensitivity and responsibility, these topics challenge traditional training in performing arts and may not easily be adapted in the professional education of artists.

Going back to the notion of embodiment and Rauhala, it is important to emphasise that embodiment refers to material-organic processes in Rauhala's thinking, and that other authors and practitioners define embodiment in various ways. Embodiment, indeed, has been a central theme in my research and pedagogy. My view on dialogue as an embodied phenomenon led me to explore embodiment, embodied knowledge, embodied learning, and embodied language learning.<sup>7</sup> For me, embodied learning is a "holistic process that takes place within the entire human being and between human beings, and in connection with the social and physical reality" (Anttila 2018, paragraph 5). While embodied activity is a fundamental element in embodied learning, it embraces not only the visible, but also invisible or inner movement.

In embodied learning "thought is placed in action and action is placed in the world" (Anderson and Harrison 2010, 11). This means that although we as human beings are able to attend to our experiences and to how our thoughts become formed, thoughts and actions also happen without our conscious control. Thus, the kind of knowledge and learning that will be formed cannot be fully prescribed. Instead, knowledge emerges from our connections and interactions with others and the world (Fenwick et al. 2011). Accepting that most of my pedagogical work deals with the unknown, and that unexpected outcomes are always part of (and maybe the most important part of) learning has been both a relief and a challenge for me. Challenges arise from the institutional requirements to articulate learning outcomes and for students to graduate in a given timeframe.

In practice, acknowledging the emergent nature of learning has generated substantial changes to the way I conceive, plan, and "teach" the courses that I am responsible for. For example, I might set up the space with materials, non-verbal and verbal cues and suggestions, and then, for the most part, let action take its own course. Or, I may invite the students to suggest themes for the course, to co-teach, and to make decisions together with me. In other words, I hardly teach in the traditional sense of the word at all. For me, this approach is connected to the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.uniarts.fi/en/study-programmes/doctoral-programme-of-artistic-research-in-performing-arts/> (University of the Arts Helsinki 3 2024).

<sup>7</sup> <https://sites.uniarts.fi/web/ellaresearchproject> (ELLA 2023).

desire and need to decolonise dance education. Decentralising the locus of knowledge related to, for example, what dance is or what art is, and whose art dance educators should engage with requires attending to multiple voices, interests, and needs. Our attempt to decolonialise dance education within the MA programme in dance pedagogy at Uniarts Helsinki is, of course, a slow and ongoing process. So far, it is visible, for example, in our curricula, where titles and contents related to Western dance forms are long gone. Dance and art, therefore, are seen as open and always evolving phenomena. However, in my view art itself is a powerful agent in pedagogical encounters. I have previously described such encounters as follows:

In the context of learning art, art is a central part of the encounter. It influences the course of events and the content of learning with its own power ... What is learned, how a person changes, and what kind of knowledge is created, cannot be predicted. The amount of knowledge of art cannot be measured, and its correctness cannot be assessed. Its value becomes visible in encounters where the knowledge of art supports humanity, strengthens communities, and changes society. (Anttila 2011, 171, translated from Finnish by the author)

The above passage also illuminates how the theme of social justice may intertwine with art pedagogy even when this connection cannot be prescribed. In my view, art pedagogy that acknowledges the learner as a holistic being connects not only the mind and the body, but also the personal with the political. Of the three core values, the third, criticality, tackles issues related to social justice directly, with the aim of educating practitioners with a deep commitment towards making a difference beyond the art world.

### Cornerstone III: Criticality

In 2020, I was asked to contribute to a book focusing on Paulo Freire's (1921–1997) legacy. This publication was to celebrate the 100th anniversary of his birth. Freire, a key author in the field of critical pedagogy, has influenced my thinking and practice immensely, since the early 2000's. In writing the chapter, I travelled through my academic path, and revisited themes on freedom, difference (again!), and hope. Through these themes, Freire's legacy became extended towards post-structuralist thought and relationality, where especially questions of power are prominent. As I zoomed in to those moments where I had been thoroughly immersed in critical theory and pedagogy, it was also

clear how this had included sustained criticality towards critical pedagogy, especially through the work of scholars on feminist pedagogy. Elsewhere, I contemplate with my colleague Anniina Suominen from Aalto University that,

As female academics, however, we acknowledge, and in many ways agree with feminist critiques towards critical pedagogy ... Thus, feminist underpinnings permeate our work and allow for personal, evocative, and embodied approaches to writing. We have allowed for ruptures, adversities, and vulnerabilities to be present throughout the book. (Anttila and Suominen 2019, 6)

For us, bell hooks' work exemplifies feminist criticality towards any pedagogy that neglects the body, emotions, vulnerability, and the desire to work for a better world. For hooks, the classroom is a location of possibility, where "we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand ourselves and our comrades, an openness, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom" (hooks 1994, 207). Personal, evocative, and embodied approaches to pedagogy, research, and writing have become more central in my work. This lineage of scholarship challenges the privilege of reason as the foundation of knowledge, and argues for "the inclusion of personal biography, narratives, a rethinking of authority, and an explicit engagement with the historical and political location of the knowing subject" (Darder et al. 2017, p. 15). This kind of critical approach manifests itself in pedagogy by always being open to students' questions and interests, but also as active posing and seeking new questions, problems, and perspectives that challenge what we already know.

Criticality is present in the curricula of the MA programme in dance pedagogy in multiple ways. Most apparently, criticality comes into play in the context of courses related to research, but also in more practical courses that question the traditional views of the artist as a gifted, exceptional individual. Thus, participatory approaches to artistic practice are in the forefront of our curriculum. Here, it might be pertinent to note that in the programme art pedagogy is seen as a form of artistic activity where pedagogical questions are ever-present (University of the Arts Helsinki MA in Dance Pedagogy 2024). The idea of the group as an artistic agent that I have developed together with the entire faculty highlights our attempt to depart from the modernist myth of the artist genius. This idea permeates the coursework on dance art in our programme, and

leads to a public, artistic-pedagogical event. Our aim is to explore the intertwining of pedagogy, art, and performance, and to realise the transformative potential of participatory performance in an ethical way (Anttila 2016, 4). Personally, I have been interested in creating situations rather than objects, in fostering connections with the social and material world, as well as performativity being understood as an affective, evocative, impactful force. In all this, nurturing dialogical, ethical relationships is fundamental. This imperative leads to constant inquiry on how the performer cares about the participant (Anttila 2016, 4), and how their roles can intertwine and develop towards mutuality.

The process of departing from the modernist, western conceptions of art as an individualistic, exclusive phenomenon has not been easy. Doubts about the possibility of shared authorship, for example, have risen from many directions, and for many students this idea is challenging. The system of higher education and survival in the field of art is largely based on cultivating individual talent, on selecting and rewarding excellence, on competition, and success. Appreciating minor gestures, budding relationships, in-betweens, unknowns, and anomalies is difficult. Our programmes, and research in our field, struggle to find stability and ground in terms of funding and sustainable conditions. The 25th anniversary seminar of the programmes focused on the importance of securing and strengthening the conditions for research in dance education and performing arts pedagogy. We asked who, if not the Theatre Academy of Uniarts Helsinki, is responsible for developing research-based pedagogies in performing arts? Our question was acknowledged, but commitment to concrete action in times of austerity is yet to be seen.

### **Future Directions: From Dismantling Gates towards Building Bridges**

Indeed, diminishing resources creates tension and competition. Global events and conflicts have ripple effects on all Europeans and beyond. The struggle with increasing costs and decreasing budgets, however, too often overshadows the loss of life and cultural heritage taking place each day in many parts of the world. During these times of global turmoil, we should think hard: how to reach out from our ivory towers of physical safety and comfort? How to dismantle the gates that we have participated in building for years, and instead, focus our efforts towards building bridges? I don't think we should do more with less, or

less with less. Instead, we should do things differently, and do different things. We should reach out and find new connections. I envision the future of dance education practice and research as a third space, where celebrating difference enhances the emergence of new cultural forms and artistic expressions. Through these, dance education might be a transformative force that permeates communities, and in so doing, enhances embodied dialogue, and through it, intercultural understanding among all.

## Author Bio

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