

## In the Midst of Pandemic: Students' Opinions on the Teaching Approaches of a Community Dance Module During Quarantine

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### Abstract

*This study is part of a postdoctoral research on creative teaching approaches of movement expression, to preschool teachers, during pandemic. It examined participants' opinions on community dance through distance learning. Methodologically, it was an Art Based (ABR), Action Research, which combined alternative forms of expression. In this article, questionnaires and focus group interviews are examined, through qualitative analysis of data. The sample consisted of 88 students of the Pedagogical Department of Preschool Education, of the University of Thessaly, Greece. The results showed that a community dance module, contributed positively to the improvement of participants' psychological state, due to quarantine and affected the effectiveness of knowledge acquisition.*

*Keywords:* dance, education, teaching, preschool

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### Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a 'pandemic'. The basic quarantine measures provided the temporary closure of most businesses and inevitably the universities (Snowden, 2020). Education was invited to explore multiple and alternative learning approaches, relating to the link between means of communication for distance learning, sociological and anthropological factors affecting the learning process (Baloran, 2020; Harari, 2020). Higher education institutions had to find passages and use teaching methods adapted to the new reality of the pandemic (Carrillo & Assunção Flores, 2020). The need to redefine educational processes with a view to a multi-prism learning approach has therefore arisen. Thus, the module of community dance and expressive movement had to find a new path in order to become functional and affective. The researcher is a professor in the University of Thessaly, conducting the specific dance module.

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### **Community Dance and Pandemic**

Research has shown that in order to make distance learning richer and more effective, participants should be encouraged to express themselves freely, engaged in a critical and reflective process of communication with the teacher, have group cohesion and create communities (Alqurashi, 2019; Baloran, 2020; Beardal et al., 1996; Carey & Coutts, 2019; Dewey, 1933; Dreamson, 2020; Garrison et al., 2010; Jonassen, 1994; Kaloo et al., 2020; Kızıl, 2021; Mezirow, 1991; Sajnani et al., 2020; Zydney et al., 2019). In times of great historical challenges, the arts give space to process one's emotions, to discharge, to defuse and to interact with other individuals (Heyang & Martin, 2020; Kourlas, 2020; Sajnani et al., 2020) thus, making any form of art a fundamental tool for expression in times of pandemic. When knowledge is perceived through collaborative and democratic approaches and allows students to contribute collectively to the whole process, then learning becomes more familiar to them (Christian et al., 2020; Sajnani et al., 2020).

Specifically, the community dance course focused on the recruitment and understanding of the creative nature of teaching and learning and on the perception of the body as a means of reflection and creation (Dewey, 1933). The practice did not aim at the technical improvement of participants and this is because dance is used as a form of creative expression and a tool for teachers' didactic. This multi-important dimension of dance, allowed this art to penetrate and be applied in different fields, to different individuals regardless of age, abilities, gender and beliefs. Thus, dance is understood as an artistic, aesthetic, cultural, anthropological, pedagogical and educational instrument and not only as a physical function and development (Anttila, 2015; Best, 2004; Kupperts & Robertson, 2007; O'Neil et al., 2019; Stinson, 1995).

There is limitation in research concerning distance learning of arts, as experiential learning and an embodied process (Blanc, 2018; Heyang & Martin, 2020; LaGasse & Hickie, 2015; Pilgrim et al., 2020; Plevin & Yu Zhou, 2020; Sajnani et al., 2019; Sajnani et al., 2020; Vega & Keith, 2012). When it comes to community dance-movement and distance learning, the limitations are even bigger. They mainly concern technical courses aiming at improving the skills and abilities of professional dancers or at educating artists in general (Anderson, 2012; Beardal et al., 1996; Berg, 2020; Clements et al., 2018; Heyang & Martin, 2020; Garland & Naugle, 1997; Kourlas, 2020; Leijen et al., 2008; Parrish, 2016).

### **Teacher Training Through Community Dance in Times of Pandemic**

The specific community dance course, generally focuses on active participation in experiential learning activities, in which movement and play are an essential component of developmental practices. It gives emphasis on the connection of art with education in an interdisciplinary way, allowing movement to be used as a tool for pre-school curriculum. The course is mainly practical, with theoretical applications to strengthen and enrich practice.

Due to the pandemic, the classes had to be conducted remotely and therefore this approach, encountered several difficulties. The challenges involved technological limitations, in terms of connectivity, limited technological knowledge, limited interactions due to switched off cameras, reduced active students' participation, limited space in students' residencies and most importantly, limitations in physical contact and group exercises. Moreover, another intense element was students' psychological state due to social distancing. Social distancing, which governs distance education, is further validated by the distancing of people as a precautionary measure in the period of the pandemic. In this way, academics were asked to produce meaningful work, in a short period of time and with many social variables. Therefore, these limitations were considered and approached as creative restrictions, building in that way a foundation for co-creation. With movement as a medium, an analogous approach was adopted allowing participants' aesthetic, educational, sociopolitical, moral, psychological and geographical factors to be reflected.

Improvisations, creative games, dance analysis through video projections and dance composition were the main axes of the module. These approaches led to a dance performance, composed and performed by the participants. The teacher acted as a director of students' needs and visions rather than a leader and choreographer. Through this process, the teacher aimed at familiarizing participants with artistic and aesthetic education through dance and assisted them in gaining understanding on the importance of experiential knowledge in the learning process. This approach gave participants an understanding of the tangible nature of knowledge in teaching and learning.

Structurally, the course focused on participants' active participation and gradually passed to the didactics where, the participants learned how to structure and compose exercises of physical expression themselves. They became animators, presenting their compositions to the rest of their classmates. Each class was a 'building block' towards the final performance.

Therefore, the teacher focused on each student and on the specific situation he/she was experiencing. The aim was to focus on an integrated, multi-sensory and multi-thematic approach to learning, framed by methods that promote student's personality, interaction, learning maturity, responsibility, critical thinking and analytical view, with emphasis on democracy and self-action.

Furthermore, scientific research on embodied or active knowledge (Sanger, 2019; Shapiro, 2008), on conscious state of mind and integration into living experience, seemed to offer a challenge for discussion about the dance experience, especially in the current state of the global pandemic (Lerman & Borstel, 2003; McFee, 1985; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; O'Neill et al., 2019; Tsouvala & Magos, 2016).

### **Methodology**

This study was an Art-Based, Action research. The sample consisted of 88 students (6th semester), from the 95 enrolled in this course, of the Pedagogical Department of Preschool Education of the University of Thessaly, Greece. The course 'physical expression and play in education' was an elective course and attendance was not mandatory. It lasted one semester that consisted of 13 (3 hours) classes. The final, visualized performance was composed by 51 students.

As an approach, art-based research, enabled the use of methods that have an executive and creative character, based on a continuous comparative qualitative analysis of data (Gerber, 2012; O'Neill et al., 2019).

The different teaching approaches emphasized on embodied knowledge and was provided by producing transformative learning beyond the traditional ways of knowledge (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Tsouvala & Magos, 2016; Leavy, 2017). Art-based research techniques aimed to describe and explore the subject from different perspectives, allowing participants to experience the action with all of their senses, making it more accessible and the experience more intense (Leavy, 2017). The interaction of theory, research practice and reflection, constantly enhanced not only students' diffusion of knowledge but teacher's didactic, too (Avgitidou, 2009; O'Neill et al., 2019).

As Action Research gives emphasis on reflection, the module focused on giving students time and space to reflect (Giguere, 2015). Subsequently, the classes took shape according to general concerns that were expressed by the participants. Afterwards, the classes moved to the justification stage where it was investigated what was functional and if not, what were the causes for the non-functionality. At this stage there was reflection on the options concerning the teaching approach and the means used, contributing to the expansion of knowledge interdisciplinary and experientially (O'Neill et al., 2019).

The final stage was that of critical analysis, where the teacher's/researcher's experience was approached with the intention of change and future improvement. Students' behaviors played a decisive role at this stage.

As follows, five (5) research questions emerged and were formulated as follows:

1. What are the predominant feelings of the participants about the situation they are experiencing, in the midst of a pandemic?
2. Can a community dance course be taught during pandemic?
3. What are the possibilities and limitations of distance learning in a community dance course?
4. What sub-elements of distance learning seem to motivate participants?

5. What are the participants' expectations from such an approach? Have they been achieved?

### **Research Methods**

Action-Research is more of a holistic problem-solving approach. Art-based research (ABR) enables the analysis of tools that have an executive character. For this reason, the research consented to the use of various research tools of critical-dialectical research example. For the purpose of this paper, questionnaires and focus group interviews were examined in order to view students' opinions and beliefs.

#### ***Questionnaires***

Questionnaires with open-ended questions were used for the participants after the end of the course. The questionnaire included open-ended questions of opinions or intentions, ie questions about how the participants feel but also what they think they have learned from the course. The questions also focused on the teaching approaches adopted, the use of dance and movement as a tool for transmitting knowledge and the effectiveness or not of distance education through creative, artistic activities.

Questionnaires are a direct way for students to submit opinions and also an easy way to collect a lot of data (Cohen et al., 2000; Rose & Grosvenor, 2001). The benefit of using questionnaires is that it reduces bias as the researchers' personal opinions cannot influence the participants' views (Rose & Grosvenor, 2001). The use of open-ended questions allows respondents to express their feelings, facilitating enhanced levels of understanding of the subject (Cohen et al., 2000).

#### ***Focus Group Interviews***

The use of semi-structured group interviews was in the form of a discussion, open, without predefined questions, but with spontaneously questions that emerged during the discussion according to the research questions. Participants were asked to express their views freely and to refer to personal experiences (Rose & Grosvenor, 2001).

The advantages of using interviews lie within the fact that they can add more depth to the research, the response rates are good and respondents are more involved in the research (Cohen et al., 2000; Halkier, 2010).

The analysis and evaluation of the data was conducted in a qualitative way. Content analysis was used as a method of text analysis after the transcription of the data (Berelson, 1971; Miles & Huberman 1994), using inductive and deductive procedures. The coding of text units produced a large amount of material and therefore content analysis assisted in reducing the complexity of texts (Bauer & Gaskell 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The answers from all participants were classified and were clustered in order to produce categories. Following that procedure, thematic categories and sub-

categories were produced. It was possible then to detect the number of times each category occurred (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Thomas & Nelson, 1996).

This process increased the analytic precision in handling the insights gained. As Bauer (2000) states: ‘...content analysis bridges statistical formalism and the qualitative analysis of material’ (p. 132).

## Results

The results are presented and discussed according to the research methods. From the 61 questionnaires that have been collected, five main categories were created according to participants’ statements. Each category was then divided into sub- categories, formed from the various reports on the same category. Categories can be seen in bold and participants’ statements in italics.

The first category concerned the distribution of **theory and practice** within the online courses. From 80 statements, 14 focused on the negative impact theory had through distance learning on this practical module. They believed that an important amount of praxis was restricted in comparison to the in-person classes. Nevertheless, they acknowledged the fact that the module although was not exclusive practical, it gave them new perspectives on how to view theory in a more creative way and opened up new horizons on the approaches used that make a class more interesting. There were 61 statements that reviled participants were satisfied with the structure of the course.

The second category concerned the **motivation** the participants had. We identified 48 statements, most of which related to the experiential nature of the course as a positive experience. Fifteen (15) statements were related to the lecturer’s good mood, and as one participant stated, *‘the motivation was transmitted by you who were waiting for us with so much pleasure’* and five (5) references to the communicative nature of the lesson, as the lecturer gave the participants motivation by the *‘space given to us to put forward our views’*. Moreover, the multidimensional structure of the module, using different techniques and approaches gave participants motivation. For example, one participant stated that *‘every time we were waiting to see something new. And that in itself was a motivation’*.

The third category concerned the impact **technology** had to the module. Of the 100 statements, which were related to technology and distance learning, 75 contained positive statements such as *‘initially I was quite skeptical about the extent to which this course could be properly implemented in the face of the pandemic and still be interesting, as it is a course that is basically about movement, however, the lecturer’s approach and ideas managed to make it one of my favorites’*. Another participant said: *‘I believe that the situation we have experienced and continue to experience has been a good excuse to try new things and new worlds that we would not have had the opportunity to explore otherwise’*. There were also recorded 25 negative statements as

for some participants *'distance learning can in no way come close to face-to-face teaching'*.

The fourth category concerned **communication**. There were 93 statements concerning opportunities for *'dialogue as an important element that influence learning'*, the power of communication as an element that first puts students in a *'good psychological state'* and thus *'helps them to attend more eagerly'* and the need for more *'intimacy with the lecturer'*. Psychology played an important role in how everyone engaged in the course and received knowledge. There were seven negative statements that focused on the lack of communication due to turned off cameras.

The final category received the most statements (276), with 138 statements referring to **shared experience** the participants had. We recorded 58 statements relating to the strength of experience. One student stated that it was a powerful experience because dance *'helps me to relax... I was given the opportunity to understand what I was feeling, to understand myself, my feelings'*.

These experiences made the learning process more meaningful with 70 statements focusing on the connection of dance with pedagogy. For example, there were statements like *'we understood the application that movement has to preschool children'* and other statements focusing on the power of movement *'to unlock us and in this way allow us to see the essence and the connection to the pedagogy'*.

From the focus group interviews, five categories emerged. The first category concerned participants' **psychological state** during quarantine. In the first stage of the interviews, fear of the unknown, fear of loss and stress for the condition were the main states the participants experienced. In the final stage of the interviews, there was a huge change in attitudes, as most participants changed their way of thinking. Twenty-five participants (25/88) said that through movement they *'untied'* and *'freed themselves'*, bringing out what was hidden and preventing them from expressing themselves. There were strong references to how the physical expression module helped them as it gave *'space to express themselves verbally and physically'*. The movement improvisations, placed them in an *'interiority'* that helped them to find *'peace'*. The performance 'In between borders' at the end of the course, was a *'strong motivation for activation'*, an *'almost meditative process'* that made them *'reflect'* in order to *'see, understand and listen to themselves differently'*. They all said that when they *'managed to balance themselves psychologically'*, they were also able to *'enjoy the learning process'* more.

The second category concerned the development of a **holistic approach** towards the community dance module. It was found that participants understood, to a large extent (78/88 participants) how movement can be used as a learning tool. The results revealed that through a holistic teaching approach, students were able to *'develop kinesthetic awareness'*, *'cognitive development'*, *'understanding of basic principles of creative dance'*, but also *'develop their research skills'* such as understanding the basic process of *'creating, presenting, critically analysing dance'*, understanding *'analysing and framing dance themes'* and *'approaching themes interdisciplinary'*. They were in

this way able to *'explore and present their own ideas'* thus, developing *'responsibility and independent work'*.

The third category concerned **the weak elements of the course**, as it has *'changed from face-to-face to distance'*. Fourteen (14/88) students felt that the *'magic'* of the course *'was lost'*, as it was impossible to be highly practical. Various factors prevented participants from participating, such as lack of space in their home, or external sounds (family, noises at home) and fatigue from attending too many lessons through a computer. An important finding here was that despite these difficulties, they tried to work around them with statements such as *'we will try to participate with what we have'* or *'we will not let the constraints hinder our learning'*.

The results of the interviews showed that the students considered the teacher's attitude (*approachable, cheerful, animating, eagerness to learn, non-processing approach to teaching, encouragement for personal enhancement, willingness to understand the situation we are in*) as **strengths of the course**, as it influenced them positively. Also, the experiential nature of the course was one of the most important factors for activating participants and engaging them in the learning process. *'Learning through experiential exercises'* and *'applying theory into practice'* seemed to be the most important factors for understanding the subject matter. Placing the results in larger categories, a fifth category was created, concerning the **communicative nature of the course**, with 25 statements pointing that *'they were given space to speak their minds'*, *'to listen to different positions from their own'*, *'to express themselves without fear of saying what the lecturer wants or needs to hear'*.

## Discussion

The results of this research showed that participants were deeply affected by the unprecedented conditions of the pandemic. The psychological state directly affected the structure of the courses and the way the researcher approached them (Sahu, 2020). Participants' interpretations showed that there was a need for their opinions to be spoken. Their voices are rarely heard, as many have stated, so through this module there was freedom of speech and expression. It was impossible not to take into account the *'despair'*, the *'fear'*, the *'uncertainty'*, the *'lack of interest'* for a lesson, but also the *'need'* for a factor that would allow them to *'get out of the negative thoughts and feelings'*. The results showed an insurmountable need for communication, for connection with the body and with others and for multimodal expression. Only when the module focused on these factors were participants activated. At the end of the course the psychological state of the students was completely different.

It appeared that dance and movement and the involvement in a performance, changed the participants' feelings and the way they experienced the quarantine. According to Heyang and Martin (2020), art in higher education brings hope and dance changes the way we experience a situation. Similarly, Sajnani et al. (2020) make it imperative to use the arts as a utilization of their therapeutic character. Thus, the



research revealed that in order for learning to be effective, the emotional state of students must be taken into account. As Brooks et al. (2020) argues, distance education should not be considered independently, but in conjunction with the situation the learner experiences in the midst of a pandemic and especially in quarantine conditions.

In addition, it was observed that most participants stated that the course promoted their self-efficacy. Being the focus of the learning process, by actively participating, the learner is given the opportunity to become responsible and autonomous in the learning process and in this way, self-efficacy is cultivated (Goulao, 2009).

Participants admitted that the process of distance education when is structured in an expanded space of interaction and reciprocity, it enhances their maturity in terms of the way they perceive knowledge (Avgitidou, 2014).

It also emerged that in order for a physical expression course to be effective from distance, it should focus on practice, experience and the application of theory into practice. Most students admitted that kinetic exploration, improvisation, and experimentation allowed them to explore themselves, creating bridges between their inner sense of self and their external relationship with others. Being free from critic, one could become an observer of himself/herself in a genuine way (Tsompanaki, 2009). Participants specified that this embodied nature of the course allowed them to understand the importance of movement in the educational process, understand it more in depth and discover ways to use it.

The research has led to the understanding that such procedures can be applied even remotely, despite space, sound and interaction constraints. Any restrictions were used as agents for creativity and not as inhibitors. For example, participants could improvise from a chair, taking space constraint as a game of spatial awareness.

Nevertheless, the limitations were many as any processing which makes cooperation and physical interaction imperative, was left out of course. Exercises could not be performed in pairs or in groups and that was missing from the course.

Moreover, factors such as limited space in their home, sounds from their environment, lonely way of performing movement, poor internet connection, were predominant limitations in distance education.

However, an interesting finding was the fact that even those who gave negative statements about this new reality of studies, were content with what they had. They did not allow restrictions to stand in the way for knowledge to arise. It is profound that difficult circumstances must be viewed with optimism.

As for the additional elements that motivated participants, the results showed that they need to connect their knowledge with their future action as active teachers. When the module involved teaching techniques and allowed them to facilitate an exercise, an idea or even the final performance on their own, it gave them motivation.

Thus, the creative process that led to a performance, but also the ease of its presentation through technology were in the center of interest.

At the same time, an important driving force for learning was the teacher's mood and her involvement in the whole process as a member of the team, beyond any hierarchy. As emphasized in similar researches (Edwards et al., 2006), the intimacy, the cooperation, the deeper communication with the teacher seems to greatly influence the participation of students in the courses, not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively. That approach gave an opportunity to hear their 'voices' and to give students speech, as they stated. The results showed that it is a very important factor as it enables them to discover the possibilities, to believe in themselves and to break the molds placed by the current system.

Furthermore, the physical expression course met the expectations of the students. Teacher's approach worked positively in the whole learning process and responded to the wishes they had in the beginning of the course. Participants stated that they did not expect that there would be practice, that technology would work positively, and that the module could escape the one-dimensional process of delivering theoretical reports, as they were accustomed in most cognitive subjects taught during the pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, a community dance course, in a preschool education department can help enhance collaboration, support participant initiative, encourage creativity, encourage teacher-learner relationships, enhance critical thinking and reflection, enhancing participants' research skills, highlighting personal artistry, promoting lively critical discussions, strengthening responsibility and encouraging collective empowerment and emancipation (Alqurashi, 2019).

It can be implemented remotely, even in a period of pandemic, where confinement is experienced. It contributes positively to the improvement of the psychological state of the participants, as they express and share common experiences.

However, it cannot replace in-person learning, both in terms of content and on how it is addressed by participants. The limitations are numerous and mainly concern the lack of immediacy due to the use of technology, which also limits the teacher. But this research has shown that if constraints are accepted from the beginning and treated as creative methods, then learning becomes more interesting.

It is now certain that with the return to the new normality, the in-person lessons will not be the same as in the pre-pandemic era. Substantive issues emerged that will enhance the content of the course, the teacher's approaches and thus, the way students will receive knowledge.

This research highlighted the need to hear students' views, to allow them to be active partners of the teacher and not passive recipients. When we listen to students then

teaching is more direct and more effective, because it is addressed to the person as an active citizen and not to an anonymous passive group.

Through art-based methods, space and time were given to identify what is essential to my teaching. I was able to listen better to my students and hear their needs more effectively. The ability to collect data in a participatory context through art-based methods has had many benefits. I was able to observe more deeply the connection between the dance and pre-school education. This experience provided insights into dance and its application to education that could be of reciprocal benefit both for students and professors.

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## **Pandeminin Ortasında: Öğrencilerin Karantina Sırasında Toplu Dans Modülünün Öğretim Yaklaşımlarına İlişkin Görüşleri**

### **Öz**

*Bu çalışma, pandemi sırasında okul öncesi öğretmenlerine hareket ifadesinin yaratıcı öğretim yaklaşımları üzerine yapılan bir doktora sonrası araştırmasının bir parçasıdır. Katılımcıların uzaktan eğitim yoluyla toplu dans hakkındaki görüşlerini incelemiştir. Bu çalışma, alternatif ifade biçimlerini birleştiren Sanat Temelli (ABR) bir eylem araştırmasıdır. Bu makalede, anketler ve odak grup görüşmeleri, verilerin nitel analizi yoluyla incelenmiştir. Örneklem, Yunanistan'daki Teselya Üniversitesi'nin Okul Öncesi Eğitim Pedagoji Bölümü'nün 88 öğrencisinden oluşmaktadır. Sonuçlar, bir toplu dans modülünün, karantina nedeniyle katılımcıların psikolojik durumlarının iyileşmesine olumlu katkıda bulunduğunu ve bilgi edinme etkinliğini etkilediğini göstermiştir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dans, eğitim, öğretme, okul öncesi