

13 Dance assessment as experiential learning

Interdisciplinary skills:	critical thinking reflection
Characteristics:	assessment with rubrics
Role:	teacher-led assessment
Purpose:	of learning
Course:	Integrative seminar 4: Societal Challenges. Bridging self and other through mind and dance
Program:	BSc in Politics, Psychology, Law and Economics
Institute:	University of Amsterdam (NL)
Study load:	168 hours
Group size:	16 students
Year:	second-year bachelor's students
Lecturer:	Lela Mosemghvdlishvili

In this experimental course, dance improvisation is used as a prime assessment tool to allow students to gain a deeper understanding of concepts as empathy, compassion, and consciousness. By doing this, students are able to obtain knowledge through direct observation and experience within their own body. The lecturer experienced how movement practice can be integrated in the learning process and can nurture students' soft skills as well as create novel ways to facilitate deep thinking and reflection. This is perhaps not a form of assessment that is easy to apply in every context, but it is a challenging and innovative example.

About the course and assessment

Brief description of the course

In this integrative seminar, students are invited to consider and reflect on the role of academia in responding to societal challenges and their own possibilities of action and responsibilities as interdisciplinary researchers. Students will be stimulated

in critical and reflective thinking, collaboration and experiential learning, which means learning through experiencing and doing. The emphasis is put on nurturing students' soft skills such as the ability to reflect and be self-reflexive, to explore, to acknowledge and appreciate personal vulnerabilities and strengths, and to appreciate humbleness and develop imagination. Students discuss what it means for a being to be and how we understand one another. In the course, students take time to consider concepts such as mind and consciousness, and empathy and compassion.

The lecturer hopes to create an open space to compel students' deep thinking and engagement with their own emotions, values, and ideas. In this way, students are encouraged to observe and reflect on their own understanding of self. Additionally, they explore possibilities as well as limitations of empathizing with, relating to, and understanding each other. Students' skills such as the ability to listen, empathize, and relate to each other's emotional states are most valued in this course.

Alongside traditional classroom settings such as readings and discussions, students will have an opportunity to explore analytical concepts through body movement and dance. Various techniques and exercises from modern, folk, and circle dances will be used to help students overcome constraints (shyness), bond with each other, allow creative self-expression, and most importantly enable the deep integration of knowledge through movement in a safe and non-intimidating environment.

The intended learning outcomes of this course that are addressed in this example

The student is able to:

- contribute creatively to analyze the problems and come up with innovative solutions, which requires the integration of knowledge
- develop soft skills, specifically empathetic capacity

Description of the assessment

Along with keeping a reflective journal (60%) and participating in class discussions (20%), students express subjective experiences in a mediated dance form (20%). As an end product, students get together in pairs to create a short performance, where they choreograph a chosen concept without words and music through movement in space. The assignment is to create a choreographic piece (one to three minutes) on a selected analytical concept that was covered in the course content (e.g. alienation, empathy). The activity involves students researching the concept through movement, creating abstraction, memorizing the sequence of movements, rehearsing, and performing it. During the process, the lecturer and peers give feedback on the 'raw' dance. Students receive a grade for this assignment.

Assessment materials

Grades for the dance performance are determined by a grading rubric that focuses on the following categories: **clarity of purpose** regarding which concept is being abstracted and performed through dance; **creativity and unique delivery** of the content; and **movement invention**.

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Clarity of purpose (30%)			
Audience members find it hard to discern the purpose (analytical concept) that is expressed through the choreography. The choreography appears disconnected from the topics/key concepts covered in the course.	The central purpose is somewhat visible in the choreography but not fully maintained throughout the whole performance.	The central key concept that has been abstracted is clear and the choreography is staged in a way that makes identification of the concept by the audience easy.	The central key concept of the choreography is evident and easily identified by audience. It is sustained throughout the whole performance.
Creativity: Unique delivery (30%)			
Did not successfully deliver content. Choreography is unable to hold audience interest or express the content through body movement in space.	Choreography is somewhat literal and resorts to direct illustration/enactment of the concept.	Choreography demonstrates the team's own interpretation of the key concept. Uses a variety of expression forms to deliver the communicative intent to the audience.	Project demonstrated students' unique interpretation and expression of the selected key concept. It is performed with a variety of dance expression forms in an excellent manner.
Movement invention (20%)			
Team demonstrates a poor skill level in movement invention in response to a selected concept.	Team demonstrates an adequate skill level in spontaneous movement invention in response to a chosen concept.	Team demonstrates a variety of movement invention by using different tools for dance expression (rhythm, repetition, accent).	Team demonstrates an excellent skill level in creating new and interesting movements. In designing the new movements, the coordination between dancers creates a unique choreography between the dancers.
Performance skills (20%)			
Team members demonstrated confusion on the stage. Choreography was not memorized. Dancers showed little engagement. Lacked coordination.	Team members demonstrated knowledge of individual parts, but attunement with each other can be developed and improved.	Choreography was well performed. There was no evidence of confusion on the stage. Each participant has memorized and correctly performed own part in the choreography. Demonstrated enthusiasm during the performance through facial and body expressions.	Demonstrated full immersion in choreography by well-coordinated movements and appropriate facial and body expressions. Each team member was in attunement with rhythm and tempo of the group choreography. Individual parts were memorized, clearly articulated, and skillfully performed.

Experiences and insights of the lecturer

Lela Mosemghvdlishvili

The reason for using the assessment method

Dance as a learning activity and assessment form originated from the idea of learning through direct experience. A concept of knowledge (*paññā* in Pāli) used in Buddhism inspired the development of this part of the course. Three types of knowledge are distinguished. The first is learned knowledge or borrowed wisdom (*suta-maya-paññā*) that comes from reading books and listening to teachers; the second is reflective knowledge (*cinta-maya-paññā*) that is acquired through pondering and logically thinking about what one has learned. The third is superior wisdom (*bhāvanā-maya-paññā*) and can be viewed as experiential wisdom, which means obtaining knowledge through direct observation of meditative experiences within one's own body (Thēpwisutthimēthi, 2017). Training students' empathy through dance and body movement is a form of experiential learning. Dance is one way to elicit experiential learning through their body.

Reflections on the assessment method

What I learned is that it is possible to assess in a non-traditional manner, although I felt personally insecure. In the first year that I taught the course, I implemented dance in my course but did not grade it. In the second year, it was a pass/fail assessment. By the third year, it was graded in more detail. It comes with experience over the years to get acquainted with and confident in assessing in a non-traditional way. The second thing I learned is that by adjusting the traditional classroom setting – for example, mingling as a university teacher between the students – you can create a burst of trust and openness. In next year's course, I would like to document the dance performances better.

I am thinking of video-recording the performances so that they can be preserved. It is like a positive memory we can keep. We can look back and see what it means to receive a certain grade. In this way, the performances can also be shared with the next cohort.

Advantages and disadvantages

Dance can create opportunities for critical thinking in the classroom. During the process of making the dance or performance, students incorporate and integrate literature and practice sound decision-making. In that sense, it strongly resembles more usual assignments that students undertake such as writing an essay or giving an oral presentation. Besides, dance can greatly enhance trust and openness and create a safe space in the classroom. Dancing and body awareness can be a supplementary tool to engage students better, to help them experience and reflect their own learning process, and to improve the group dynamic.

The biggest advantage is the enthusiasm of students. I think nothing is more rewarding for a lecturer than seeing your students coming into your classroom with

a smile – a clear sign that they want to be there. I experienced it as a very pleasant and rewarding learning atmosphere and drew a lot of energy and inspiration from how enthusiastic the group was.

The student perspective

For me, this course was rewarding not just academically but even more so personally because it let me reassess how I was approaching academia and made me reflect on what knowledge is. The course required me to be open and vulnerable and it helped me deal with stress. The dance assessment itself was a learning experience. With dancing, you are less in your head and it has elements of fun. It also helps me to bond with classmates. Normally every working group is similar, you kind of know what to expect. Dancing with your classmates is something completely different from sitting with them in a classroom. It results in the active participation of everyone in the room. A disadvantage is that not every student feels comfortable in the beginning. Therefore, I think it is important to make an effort to include everyone. There needs to be safety mechanisms in place.

Key advice

Using dance or body movement as an assessment form may seem difficult, but in practice this can be done anywhere. You don't need a dance studio; with a little effort, you can enact physical movement in any classroom. Be open to this possibility. Do not be scared to ask your students to get up in the classroom.

Further readings

<https://experiential-dance.com/teaching/>

Thēpwisutthimēthi, P. (2017). *Under the Bodhi Tree: Buddha's original vision of dependent co-arising*. (B. Santikaro, ed.). Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.

McGarry, L.M., & Russo, F.A. (2011). Mirroring in dance/movement therapy: Potential mechanisms behind empathy enhancement. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 38*(3), 178-184.