

Integrating Character Dance into Classical Dance Technique: Enhancing Artistic Education

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1-PURPOSE

This study aims to explore the interaction between Character Dance and Classical Dance Technique, examining how this integration contributes to students' development, both technically and expressively. By focusing on the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary dimensions of this fusion, the research will investigate the ways in which these combined approaches enhance students' learning processes. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: "What are the consequences of integrating Character Dance and Classical Dance Technique on students' technical, expressive, and narrative abilities, and how does this integration enable them to become more artistically versatile?".

2 - THEORETICAL and PEDAGOGICAL BACKGROUND

This study is an ongoing investigation situated within interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary frameworks in dance education. It explores the integration of Character Dance within Classical Dance Technique as part of the Master's Program in Dance Education at the Escola Superior de Dança (ESD), Polytechnic Institute of Lisbon, Portugal. The research specifically focuses on its application within Specialized Artistic Education (EAE) in Portugal. The study was conducted at the Ana Mangericão Dance Conservatory (EDAM), focusing on students in their 4th and 5th years of the EAE program. For this purpose, the Classical repertoire of the ballets *Swan Lake* and *Paquita* was chosen as a case study, with a particular emphasis on the Character Dance *Mazurka*. This approach holds significant potential to contribute to the artistic and educational training of dance students.

Transdisciplinarity merges knowledge from various artistic fields, such as music, and vocabulary from Character and Classical Dance, offering a more holistic understanding of dance. Rhodes (2006) argues that this integration enriches dancers' cultural perspectives and technical training. Character Dance blends folk traditions with theatrical storytelling,

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introducing cultural depth and emotional complexity to Classical Ballet, thereby enhancing both the technical and expressive aspects of training. On the other hand, **interdisciplinarity** extends this approach, breaking down the boundaries between disciplines to encourage students to engage with the historical, cultural as well as geographical dimensions of movement. This approach fosters critical thinking and provides a multidimensional understanding of dance, calling for versatile dancers capable of diverse artistic expressions.

This study draws on various methodologies and scholarly approaches to Character Dance, including *My Approach to Character Dance* by Maria Fay (2020). In her work, Fay emphasizes the importance of stylistic authenticity, musical sensitivity, and the narrative qualities inherent in Character Dance—principles that align closely with the objectives of this research.

The integration of Character Dance and Classical Dance Technique represents a dynamic pedagogical strategy that enhances both technical ability and artistic depth. By fostering interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, dance educators can provide a more holistic education, enriching students' technical skills, cultural literacy, and emotional expression. By merging technique with narrative and cultural context, this study underscores the importance of Character Dance in classical ballet education, contributing to the development of versatile and culturally sensitive artists.

Classical Dance Technique and Repertoire Ballet

Rooted in the Renaissance, Classical Ballet has long been a cornerstone of dance education, emphasizing precision, grace and the codification of movement. Despite its historical roots, it remains relevant today, continuing to inform both traditional and contemporary dance performances. Salosaari (2001) observes that many 19th-century works continue to inspire both classical ballet repertoires and modern reinterpretations. The incorporation of Character Dance into the classical repertoire enhances not only technical proficiency but also the artistic depth of the dancer's performance. By engaging with these dances, students are introduced to diverse movement languages and cultural contexts, which expand both their technical and expressive capabilities.

Character Dance: Historical Context and Role in Classical Training

Character Dance, originating from folk traditions, plays a vital role in classical ballet training. Dances such as the Polish Mazurka, Spanish Flamenco, and Italian Tarantella bring both cultural and narrative richness to ballet (Lopoukov, 2006). Scholars such as Shagalov (2016)

and Bauer (2016) highlight that Character Dance deepens dancers' understanding of movement, connecting them to the cultural and historical roots of these folk traditions. Brun (2023) explores the adaptation of Hungarian folk dance within the Uruguayan diaspora, focusing on how cultural traditions are preserved and transmitted through tailored teaching methodologies. Similarly, integrating character dance into classical technique classes serves to preserve and adapt traditional dance forms. It expands students' movement vocabulary, enhancing their emotional and narrative depth, and ultimately enriching their overall artistry.

The key components of Character Dance include:

1. **Stylistic Authenticity and Embodiment:** Involves the integration of culturally specific gestures and movement patterns that enhance performance authenticity.
2. **Musical Sensitivity and Rhythmic Precision:** Cultivates coordination and musical awareness, essential for executing folk rhythms found in dances like Mazurka.
3. **Expressive Narrative and Cultural Storytelling:** Focuses on transforming movement into meaningful, emotionally rich storytelling, steeped in historical and cultural context.

Integrating Character Dance into classical training helps students expand their movement vocabulary, deepen their emotional and narrative capacities, enriching their overall artistry.

Interdisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity in Dance Education

The interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary frameworks are pivotal in contemporary dance education, providing a comprehensive approach to understanding dance as a multifaceted art form. **Interdisciplinarity** facilitates the intersection of dance technique, history, and cultural context, enhancing dancers' ability to interpret movements within broader cultural narratives. **Transdisciplinarity**, seeks to transcend the boundaries of distinct disciplines, allowing for a more unified and holistic comprehension of dance.

In this study, Character Dance exemplifies how interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches can enhance dance education. By integrating folk dance traditions with classical ballet, Character Dance not only refines technical skills but also deepens student's cultural and historical comprehension. Scholars such as Bauer (2016) argue that this fusion broadens dancers' technical proficiencies while fostering their ability to perform with greater emotional depth and cultural resonance. In a similar way, incorporating character dance into classical technique classes mirrors the interdisciplinary approach described by Kangalov (2022) who examines the integration of Vaganova's method with character dance in sports dance. This

fusion enriches both dancers' physical training and emotional expression, allowing students to develop a more comprehensive understanding of performance. Just as in sports dance, the combination of classical and character techniques can offer dancers a holistic approach to their artistry, expanding both their movement vocabulary and emotional depth.

3 – RESEARCH DESIGN and METHODS

This study utilized an action research methodology, consisting of four phases: Observation, Shared Teaching, Autonomous Teaching, and Complementary Activities. This cyclical process enabled real-time adjustments and reflections on integrating Character Dance into Classical Ballet.

- **Phase 1 - Observation:** involved assessing students' existing classical dance technique as a baseline before incorporating Character Dance.
- **Phase 2 - Shared Teaching:** combined Character Dance with Classical Technique, allowing students to experience both styles.
- **Phase 3 - Autonomous Teaching:** encouraged students to incorporate, investigate and practice the aspects of Character Dance within their practice routines.
- **Phase 4 - Complementary Activities:** involved a choreography to reinforce the connection between technique and artistic expression.

The methodology was grounded in action research, which aligned with interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary principles. This approach sought to offer a comprehensive understanding of dance movement by combining different disciplines. It followed a longitudinal structure, integrating qualitative elements within the action research framework, allowing for in-depth analysis of how integrating Character Dance with Classical Ballet impacted students' technical, expressive, and narrative development.

The pedagogical intervention spanned an half year of academic year. The plan encompassed approximately 60 hours of practical teaching experience, closely coordinated with the cooperating school and supervisor support to ensure effective implementation.

4- RESULTS

This internship provided invaluable insights into adapting teaching methodologies and engaging with diverse student groups. I had the opportunity to work with two distinct classes—one consisting of five students and the other with sixteen students—which necessitated required adjustments in my teaching strategies. Collaborating with multiple instructor's

teachers further exposed me to varying pedagogical approaches, underscoring the importance of clear communication, consistency, and effective demonstration within the classroom. The cooperating school, adhering to the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) syllabus, offers a structured environment enriched with a dynamic calendar of activities that promotes both technical and creative development.

This process began a few months ago with observation sessions that allowed me to assess the students' levels and the teacher-student dynamics. These initial weeks offered crucial insight into the school's ethos, which values both technical proficiency and a strong sense of community among staff and students. Following these observations, I engaged in shared teaching sessions, during which I led barre exercises. I faced challenges in effectively communicating with students, particularly in guiding them to incorporate Character Dance movements into their repertoire. Despite the initial struggles, these experiences proved invaluable for my pedagogical growth and students' coordination movements.

Subsequent autonomous teaching sessions enabled me to refine my teaching methods and to foster the integration of interdisciplinary (narrative and expressiveness) and transdisciplinary (music and vocabulary) approaches. By incorporating teaching methodologies such as Autonomous Learning (where students learn independently, utilizing their own resources), Guided Discovery (where students are tasked with achieving a specific outcome), and Active Exploration (where the teacher guides students to discover solutions to specific problems), I was able to encourage critical thinking and exploration. This was particularly evident when students reflected on the dynamics of movement in relation to music.

In this ongoing process, I observed that the integration of Character Dance into Classical Ballet led to marked improvements in students' understanding of the movements and their underlying intentions. The narrative integration was particularly effective, as students began incorporating narrative elements into their performances, thereby deepening their interpretative abilities. There was an increased awareness of the significance of understanding the historical and cultural context behind the dances, which enriched their performances. However, this remains a work in progress, with ongoing development in both technical aspects (such as control, balance, and the transition into specific character movements) and expressiveness (the ability to convey emotions and narratives, thereby enhancing the quality of their performances).

The findings are still in a process of conclusion and underscore that this integration fosters a more holistic approach to artistic training, enhancing students' narrative capabilities while simultaneously strengthening their technical skills. This report advocates for the incorporation of such interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary methodologies into dance education.

5. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL RELEVANCE

This study offers valuable theoretical and practical contributions to the field of dance education, specifically in the integration of Character Dance with Classical Ballet. By exploring the intersection of these two elements, the research underscores the importance of an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach in dance training, which fosters a comprehensive understanding of both technical proficiency and artistic expression.

Theoretical Relevance

From a theoretical standpoint, the integration of Character Dance into Classical Ballet provides an innovative framework for developing versatile dancers. By blending the precision of Classical Dance Technique with the cultural richness and narrative depth inherent in Character Dance, this approach enhances students' ability to perform with both technical skill and emotional expressiveness. The inclusion of folk-based movements and cultural storytelling deepens students' connection to the material, cultivating a more nuanced and expressive approach to ballet. Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of interdisciplinarity in dance education. As noted by Rhodes (2006), interdisciplinarity enables students to apply their dance knowledge within broader contexts, enriching their understanding of movement and its cultural roots. By encouraging students to explore historical, musical, and cultural elements related to Character Dance, this research expands the traditional technical focus of ballet education to encompass critical thinking and cultural literacy.

Practical Relevance

On a practical level, the methodologies explored in this study can be directly applied within dance classrooms, offering a comprehensive pedagogical framework that incorporates technical training alongside cultural and narrative exploration. The research advocates for curriculum reforms that emphasize the integration or in some cases (re)integration of Character Dance, promoting the development of dancers who are not only technically proficient but also able to adapt to various artistic styles and methodologies. The findings from this study align with current trends in dance education, where the need for versatile, adaptable dancers is

increasingly emphasized. This study supports the development of such dancers by incorporating interdisciplinary teaching strategies, such as active exploration, autonomous learning and peer tutoring which enhance students' creative and expressive capacities.

In conclusion, the integration of Character Dance within Classical Ballet offers a holistic pedagogical approach that refines technical skills while encouraging artistic versatility. By fostering interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning, this study aims to contribute to the advancement of dance education, ensuring that students not only master traditional ballet techniques but also gain the cultural awareness and artistic flexibility necessary to thrive in diverse choreographic and performative settings.

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