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Dance and Fine Arts: Towards a Sensitised, Reflexive and Creative Body

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Raquel Pastor Prada

Introduction

Creative and artistic work in education benefits enormously when it is articulated and approached from the awareness and bodily experience of the knowledge, emotions and values that we want to transmit. This leads us to think, on the one hand, that the pedagogy of movement and dance can be enriched through interdisciplinary processes, in which the fine arts contribute a broad vision of art capable of encouraging the creative, expressive and affective possibilities of learning. On the other hand, creative processes related to the visual arts can be transformed into highly meaningful and personal experiences when we involve embodied learning.

Integrating the arts in educational contexts

The origin of this research topic was my doctoral thesis, defended in 2012, with some proposals in which dance is linked to different fine arts, e.g., drawing, painting, or sculpture, based on the life narratives of different artists.

In order to clarify the concept of Integrated Arts, we should ask ourselves: How can we integrate the arts through a creative process in an educational context? As Barbara Haselbach explains, it is not a matter of putting together or adding parts of a song, a dance or a poem, the true art integration intertwines 'the respective art forms throughout the entire process' (Haselbach, 2004, p. 22).

To illustrate this idea, I first introduced three projects on the Interrelation between Dance, Music and Visual Arts before starting the practical part of the presentation. These are some of the projects I have developed in relation to dance and its connection with fine arts with various groups in different educational contexts.

1. THE GEOMETRY OF NATURE – Barbara Hepworth

We started with Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975), an English sculptress who worked with simple, organic forms, inspired by nature. From 1930 onwards, her work became increasingly abstract, with pure, elemental and geometric forms, but she never lost the reference to nature and its forms.

In this proposal, the students, individually and in pairs, started exploring with the body simple geometries such as the sphere, the plane, or the line, to evolve towards more elaborate concepts such as the spiral or the hole.



Students of the Master in Education through Dance, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain.



Primary school students from CEIP Ciudad de Nejapa, Tres Cantos, Madrid, Spain.

Then they made sketches of their partners, quickly capturing the overall shape of their bodies through geometric shapes.

Finally, they chose one of the drawings to transform it into a sculpture of volumes and geometric shapes using plasticine, a material familiar to the children.



Photo 2: Primary school students from CEIP Ciudad de Nejapa, Tres Cantos, Madrid, Spain.
Photo 1 & 3: Work done with students of the Escuela Municipal de Música y Danza de Ciempozuelos, Madrid, Spain.

2. THE DANCE OF COLOURS – Sonia Delaunay-Terk and Vaslav Nijinsky

The second proposal deals with the work of Sonia Delaunay-Terk (1885-1979), co-founder of the artistic movement Orphism who became interested in dance through visual art, and Vaslav Nijinsky (1889-1950), an important dancer and choreographer of the 20th century, who came to painting through dance. In their paintings, they look for a visual representation of movement and rhythm through colour and form.

We started exploring curved and straight lines, first with the help of objects and then without them.



Students of the Escuela Municipal de Música y Danza de Ciempozuelos, Madrid, Spain.

We talked about the qualities of circles and squares, associating them to adjectives, sounds, and feelings to understand the inner life of these shapes. After introducing the two artists we started the bodily exploration of the paintings. Working in pairs, a movement composition was created followed by painting their choreography.



Students of the Escuela Municipal de Música y Danza de Ciempozuelos, Madrid, Spain.



Drawing in pairs by Primary School students from CEIP Ciudad de Nejapa, Tres Cantos, Madrid, Spain.

3. DANCE AND SCULPTURE IN BALANCE – Alexander Calder

Through the work of the sculptor Alexander Calder (1898-1976), we approached the concept of balance from different complementary and interconnected perspectives - corporal, experiential, personal, structural, plastic, visual, creative - which provided a multidimensional knowledge.

We studied the conditions of body balance, first individually and later in pairs, also inspired by Calder's sculptures, and then made a drawing of our partners.



Students of the Escuela Municipal de Música y Danza de Ciempozuelos, Madrid, Spain.

We introduced the concept of unstable equilibrium, playing at destabilising oneself by shifting the centre of gravity, decreasing the support surface, changing the focus, turning around, etc. They quickly related the *mobiles* to the previous exercise carried out in pairs. The interpretation of the *mobiles* was based on a group exploration that led the students to connect by invisible threads, to emulate the same successive and interrelated movements that give life to a *mobile*. Finally, they built their own structures with wire and coloured acetates.

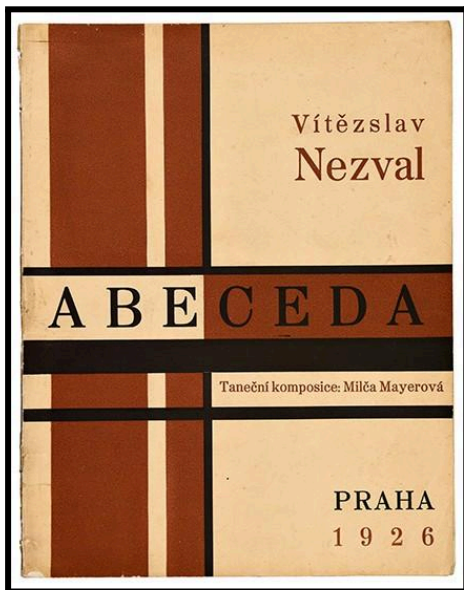


Work done with students from the Escuela Municipal de Música y Danza de Ciempozuelos, Madrid, Spain.

Practical experience: An embodied alphabet

In the practical part of the presentation, we worked on the constructivist alphabet *Abeceda*, created by the Czech artist Karel Teige in 1926 in collaboration with the poet Vítězslav Nezval and the dancer Milča Mayerová⁴.

⁴ Teige, Karel (2010). *ABECEDA (Alphabet)*, Redstone Press. 1st Ed. 1926. On the back cover, we can read: “Here is the alphabet as never before imagined. Choreographed by the beautiful dancer Milča Mayerová in a photographic alphabet in twenty-five poses. Each movement of the dance is performed to the visual counterpoint of Karel Teige’s typographic music: as angular as jazz, as syncopated as Stravinsky! One great Alphabetical performance from modernist Prague!”.



Cover of the original edition of the ABECEDE book in 1926. Taken from: <https://www.tanecniaktuality.cz/recenze/basnici-vytvarnici-a-tanecnice-inspirovani-abeceidou>



Page from the ABECEDE edition of the book by Redstone Press in 2010. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2010/jul/06/1>

This interdisciplinary work offers us a new way of looking at letters, paying attention to their visual disposition, their dynamic graphic design, and their visual and musical associations. The letters invade us, fill our bodies with lines and shapes, thus giving embodiment to the alphabet. But we also explore calligraphy as movement, our hand dancing on the paper to create new typographies, traces of a little dance. We bring the alphabet to life to recover its creative potential and reinvent it under a new artistic perspective.

We started with a physical, social and emotional warm-up, walking freely around space trying to achieve an even spatial distribution. When the music stopped, we paired up with the nearest person and walked shoulder to shoulder. We separated again when we heard: bye-bye!

Next, we introduced the theme, imagining a body alphabet, drawing a letter in the space with a body part, and adding more body parts for new letters until we used the whole body. We observed that the participants were moving more and more confidently, taking more risks in their proposals and finding more diversity in their explorations.

Then we paired up with the person closest to us. One performed a vocal improvisation based on vowels and consonants, the other interpreted bodily according to different dynamics and expressions. On hearing the finger cymbals, we changed roles. The participants showed a great deal of listening and complicity through a multitude of creative and playful ideas.

Situated biography

We introduced the book *Abeceda: a Jazz-age alphabet from Prague, 1926*. It is a constructivist alphabet created by the Czech artist Karel Teige, in collaboration with the poet Vítězslav Nezval, the photographer Karel Pasma and the dancer Milča Mayerová.

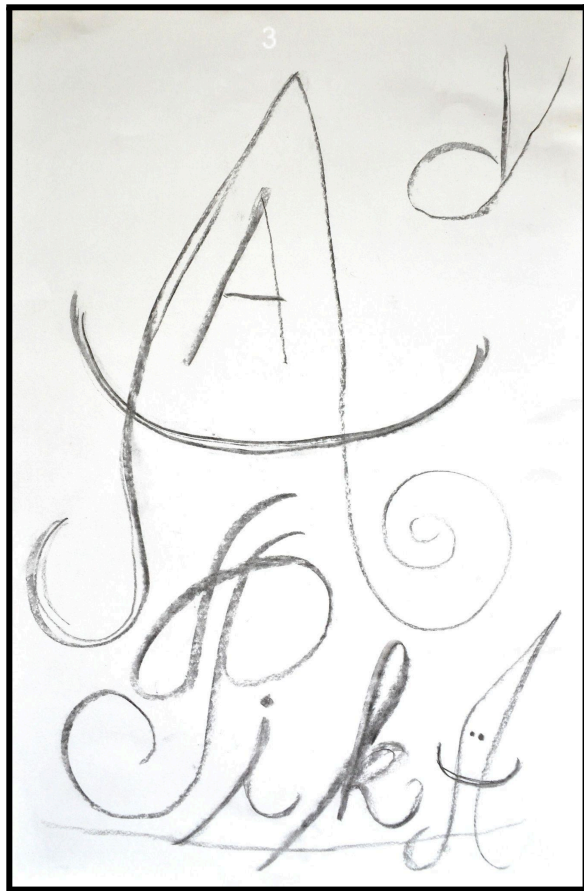
Abeceda explores the constructivist typographic design of the twenty-five letters of the alphabet created by Karel Teige to illustrate poems written by his friend Vítězslav Nezval in 1922. These poems consist of rhyming cycles inspired by the shapes of letters and their visual associations. The dancer Milča Mayerová choreographed these designs with body positions for each letter that were photographed by Karel Pasma, and later turned into beautiful photomontages. Teige was passionate about the new *Bauhaus* theories and advocated the alliance between artistic creation and the media of the industrial world. Letters seen as simple everyday signs were originally reinvented as abstract, geometric and elegant designs without forgetting their linguistic and communicative function. Teige successfully finds a perfect and distinct solution for each letter within a constructivist aesthetic of clear, reductionist and elemental forms. Their graphic components - vertical, horizontal, diagonal, circular, semi-circular - are recreated by the dancer through linear and geometric body positions, close to modern dance, which revolutionised the aesthetics of classical dance in the first decades of the 20th century.

Mayerová was probably influenced by the application of the guiding principles of constructivism to body movements, which in the dance context of the time could be called the triadic style, a reference to the *Triadic Ballet* that Oskar Schlemmer had premiered in 1922 in Stuttgart. Mayerová, dressed in sportswear, sometimes depicts the letter with her whole body, while at other times only one or several body parts are used to recreate them. We could say that, beyond a literal reproduction of Teige's typography with an evident mimetic sense, she makes a creative interpretation that extracts the essence and emphasises the most relevant characteristics of the lettering. Some of these interpretations respond to static positions that do not indicate movement, but nevertheless in others we can imagine how this dancer would move, as in the case of the H, R, S, W, X or Y.

In this creation Teige and his collaborators succeed in uniting dance, body art, graphic design and poetry. Mayerová's positions give body and life to the letters, they personify and embody the alphabet in a visual dance, which Nezval himself described as a "living poem". Verbal, graphic, corporal poetry. The book is an exquisite and singular exercise in the integration of the arts.

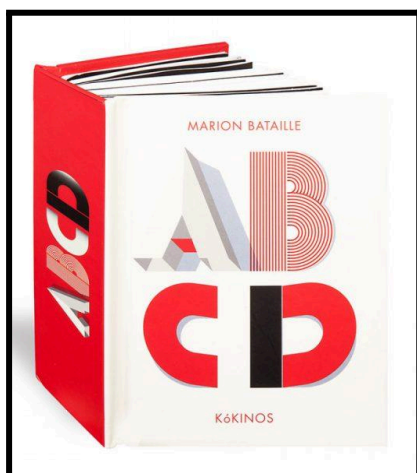
Creative Exploration

We pair up with the person furthest away from us. One person draws several letters trying to represent different and varied typographic designs. The partner interprets them in space and invents positions and movements for each letter like the body typographies we saw in the book. We have white paper and charcoal or black paper and white pencils. On hearing the finger cymbals, change roles. After a few minutes to organise the teams, the spatial arrangement and the distribution of materials, participants start their exploratory work with great concentration, the atmosphere is calm but full of creativity.



Work done by participants at the presentation during the Convention.

After looking at the book *ABCD*, by Marion Bataille (2008) to see how letters are built with volume and how some letters emerge from others, the same teams tried forming some of the letters in the book and their transformations.



Cover of the book *ABCD*, by Editorial Kókinos. Taken from:
<https://www.liberespacio.com/tienda/libros/abcd/>



Inside pages of the book *ABCD*, by Editorial Kókinos. Taken from:
<https://graficatessen.es/libros-recomendados-abc3d-de-marion-bataille/>

A new time for creative exploration unfolds. The pairs look for divergent ideas and creative solutions to shape the letters together. They also make some decisions after testing their initial ideas to tackle the next activity.

Creative Composition

We created a movement composition based on the previous exploration introducing individual proposals of the initial exercises and accompanying ourselves with the voice, either by recreating the sound of each letter, words, phrases or poems that begin with that letter. After elaborating our creative body alphabet we share the compositions with the group.

Reflection

The participants shared some observations and reflected about what multidisciplinary work can contribute to a regular movement and dance class; how creative processes are developed in children's classes to ensure that their bodily responses are clear and precise; and what other creative possibilities can arise when working with alphabets from different cultures.

Conclusion

In this proposal, we investigated the areas of relationship, connection, confluence and complementarity between the visual arts and dance, shaping an interdisciplinary didactic application for their integrated teaching. We explored different artistic elements and parameters from dance and visual arts in a connected and complementary way. Our purpose was to reflect on the educational benefits of artistic integration in the classroom, through a methodological model that works around interdisciplinarity, creativity and art with interesting educational applications.

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