

Budapest Contemporary Dance Academy

Dancer BA

# LEARNING STRATEGY

GUIDELINES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR  
DANCERS

THESIS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Personal interest for the topic

My interest behind the Learning Strategy topic is to share my own experience and knowledge about learning choreographies and dance sequences more precisely, in a shorter amount of time and with a deeper understanding. I truly believe that the success of a dancer does not only depend on their physical ability. In the contemporary world of dance, it is even more important to be quick in understanding a given task, learning precisely what is given, be able to adjust to a new situation: be it a new style, space, group or teacher. For me, it was always quite easy to learn and remember dance sequences, but I cannot say it was happening by itself – as if it was a miracle. For as long as I can remember, I have always been a minimalist and perfectionist. This helped me to be consistent with my thoughts while learning and practicing.

This work is directed towards dancers of intermediate and advanced levels and for anyone who is studying dance and has an intention to develop professional dance skills. This learning process can also be valuable for beginners.

### 1.2. Specification of the topic

In my experience, in order to develop technical skills, a dancer should first know how to learn the movement sequence as precisely as possible. It is also important to do it in a short amount of time. For example, attending a workshop or in other situations when time is limited, it is a good skill to learn fast, so that more time can be used for working on performance skills.

I don't mean that learning fast is the priority, yet it would be helpful because it would leave more time for other aspects of dance. We all have a different mindset and background for learning. Sequences can be learned very fast but forgotten in one day. They can also be learned slowly and the information stays in the brain and body for many years. I am trying to find an optimal speed of learning so that the main focus can be on the deeper roots of the information. Another positive that comes from learning fast would

be, once movement sequences are learned, there is time to add layers on top of the original movement: jump higher, move faster and further, etc.

There can be different approaches in different classes. For example, improvisation does not always require specialized knowledge and attention. Because of this, I want to focus this paper specifically on learning strategies when attending technical classes or learning exact choreographies for performance. Daily, we try to memorize sequences in ballet class, floorwork class, modern techniques, etc. If we can do this part more precisely, afterwards, we can do the exercise itself better and start working on details and layers.

I would like to propose some methods to begin this process – how dancers can prepare themselves and what is important to know beforehand; and, methods of how to direct this process – individual work, the taking of notes. I would also discuss the importance of having a background in a dance field and the need to fill our knowledge with new information.

In my own personal process, I ask myself how the important points in the choreography relate to each other and how I memorize them. I have built for myself a step by step process which relies on my own strategies and experiences.

In my paper, I mostly rely on my own findings, although, the literature I refer to are very good examples of how to view and analyze movement. One of the works is by Ann Hutchinson Guest titled *Labanotation: The System of Analyzing and Recording Movement*. That is a fourth edition of a book which continues to research the methodology and findings written first by Rudolf Laban and, later, continued by others (for example, Irmgard Bartenieff, a former Laban student who worked on further development of physical aspects of Laban's work). Another book I refer to is *Creative dance for learning* by Mary Ann Brehm and Lynne McNett. “In this book we approach dance both as an art form standing on its own and as an art activity that enhances learning across the curriculum.” (Brehm and McNett, p. x)

In order not to write only about my personal Learning Strategy experience – I explored this subject using the same process I used when I was in my first year in the Budapest Contemporary Dance Academy (BCDA), as well as my work with the Tallinn Ballet School of Estonia. In my work, I will refer to feedback from BCDA and Ballet School students, which I received from our personal, unrecorded discussions.

The Learning Strategy topic is a good field for research since I can follow my own notes on the topic and, at the same time, gather ideas and notes from other dancers. I always try to get feedback for my work and I value the opinion of others. I tried to find out what the difficulties and questions are so that I can digest them in order to find new solutions. This process helps me find out what actually works in practice and what can be passed on as so-called *lifehacks*.

## 2. PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

### 2.1. Theoretical preparation

While searching for one's own learning strategy, it is very important to first acknowledge some simple suggestions. We have all heard of them before in dance classes or in life, but we always tend to forget them. Because of this, we lose our awareness and focus.

Naturally, it is obvious that before learning anything in class it has to be made clear what the goal is. If the goal is to properly learn a dance sequence, it is important to be present, have a clear mind and have a desire to learn. I wish to mention all the moments, which can distract a successful learning process.

First of all, I would suggest not to bring into the space of work any unimportant objects, things which distract attention, thoughts or problems. For example, in creative dance, teachers and students concentrate on exploration and freedom, but there is always a danger that creativity will become chaos. "... provide a stable learning environment where students can focus on movement studies and their bodies' responses to movement." (Brehm and McNett, p. 139). Creative dance practice is not my main focus in this paper, although, in technical class it is even more important to not get distracted. In any dance class, unnecessary distractions should be avoided.

Obviously, it is impossible to eliminate all distractions 100%, but it is worth trying. We should try to minimize the chance for our focus to drift away from the tasks in class. This is why it is important to wear dance clothes which do not distract from the movement in class and to work in an environment which is not cluttered with unnecessary objects. I am not proposing dancers should work in completely empty spaces but it is important to keep focused on the tasks in class, without outside interference.

Second, I would like to make a simple suggestion – be excited! There will be days when you don't feel well or life is difficult outside of the studio. This is when dancers must find ways to overcome these bad days. Many times, if we can just go into class without even thinking about what is happening in our lives – we will discover the energy to keep going. This will help us to stay present, interested and actively growing.

Third, I would remind everyone to breathe! Conscious breathing is the key to both moving and learning. Oxygen helps keep the body full of energy, assists in the fast recovery our muscles and helps our brain stay focused and concentrated. This natural, unconscious activity, is an important quality when used thoughtfully. In the learning process, breathing can be an important reference point when trying to remember movement. Breathing not only helps to enhance movement quality by regulating the depth of our breath, it also helps when learning a sequence. For each movement we connect to our inhale, there will be a movement we connect to our exhale. These can be helpful reference points when trying to remember choreography.

Be aware of the entire situation in your environment. Since we are not always going to feel perfect, we must find ways to better understand, accept and connect to what we continue to have while moving: body, force, time and space.

### 2.1.1. Usage of Elements of dance

Movement cannot exist separately from the presence of the body, force, space or time. By using these four elements, we are given an opportunity to move in regular life, as well as to create a dance from combining different movements. “A dancer uses the body as an expressive instrument to create movement forms by manipulating qualities of force, time, and space.” (Brehm and McNett, p. 27). It is important to bring attention and acknowledge these elements, as they are essential in making the learning process easier and more clear.

#### **The body**

Before working with our body, as we do with any tool, we have to know what its structure is and its basic movement qualities. When first applying the Learning Strategy, it is not necessary to go deeply into the anatomy of the body. Later, though, when working in an advanced level, it might be necessary. In the beginning, though, it would be important to examine where the movement originates, name it and then, use it for reference in future movement.

It is helpful to, first, name the body parts: torso, head, legs, feet, arms and hands. Going deeper and more detailed, we can think of the bones and joints of the body: spine, ribs, shoulders, pelvis, knees etc. What is also helpful, is to define basic movements and qualities as well: bending, stretching, twisting, opening and closing, shaking, falling, dropping, swinging, etc.

Movement can happen in one spot (axial) or move in space (locomotor).

#### **The time**

Often the rhythm, and/or mixtures of it, can help people learn and remember choreography. We can count exact beats (pulse) or rely on our own inner feelings.

Usually, we can split a sequence of movements into fast and slow ones. In more complicated choreography, we can recognize when tempo is changing or staying constant, gradually growing or slowing down.

## **The space**

It is important to notice the size of a studio space or the texture of an outdoor space. Due to the dimensions of a space, body movement can also change in quality – the movement can become larger or smaller in relationship to the space around it.

Our bodies are surrounded by two types of space: personal and general (shared). While moving in space, we should acknowledge the use of different levels: high, middle and low. In addition, we should determine where we are in space – our orientation of our body to the front of the space.

## **The force**

Movement cannot happen if there is no force. “... the force of a movement is produced by a movement impulse, a contraction of muscles that requires energy or effort.” (Brehm and McNett, p. 37)

Movement can be forceful or inactive, depending on the amount of effort involved. It can be performed suddenly, or gradually; it can be multi-focused, or having a single focus; strong, or gentle.

These four elements are often used in creative dance. Even though creative dance is based on the conceptual aspects of movement rather than the technical, I believe practicing the main ideas of both, can help a lot in movement practice. Personally, I really enjoy movement games and different creative tasks<sup>1</sup> as I find them very important for practicing awareness and focus on details. Meanwhile, within the learning process in class, it helps a lot to be curious and connected to these elements as they would be important in creative research.

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<sup>1</sup> Starting from simple tasks as walking in a group and changing speed without having one leader to decide, until more complicated tasks which involve movement material, have many layers of concentration etc.



## 2.2. Background: The scope of a person's knowledge, education and experience

Learning Strategy can change a lot depending on the situation and the amount of previous knowledge in a field. All the experiences we have had in life, or in this case, in dance, have had an input on our brain: consciously or not. By learning and experiencing, we create a memory to which we can return and refer to when needed.

These memory recalls help us to create associations and images. "...brain functions evolve from and depend upon movement. Why is this so? The same neural circuits that regulate physical tasks are used with thinking processes because they involve recalling, evaluating, and sequencing actions. The brain "walks through" these actions as it remembers, plans, and makes decisions." (Brehm and McNett, p. 21). The brain helps us to learn new material faster and helps us to retain it longer – if we give our body the opportunity to learn it physically as well as theoretically. Every person has her/his own background which supports or suspends further development.

*Learning* and *memorizing* within this context are two different actions. For example, when learning a written text, we try to memorize the order of words. In order to succeed in memorizing the words, we should know the meaning of these words and already have some associations connected to them. Knowing the meaning of the words is essential in order to have full understanding, otherwise, it becomes an act of memorizing letters which are put together at random.

During a TEDx Talks lecture about training our memory (Lieuw On), I discovered I could not complete the given task and memorize the right order of the words because I didn't know the meaning of one of the words. I could memorize almost everything, but still missed a word toward the end. After experiencing this lecture, I could feel the difference – learning comes when a person has a large enough vocabulary. When this happens, a person can start memorizing exact texts, in any way necessary.

It is the same in the field of dance. Naturally, a person who has studied classical ballet for many years will learn the sequences in a ballet class much faster than a non-experienced person. This knowledge can be useful with other classes as well. For example, if a person feels confident in the theoretical and practical knowledge of leg positions in classical ballet then, during a contemporary dance class, she/he can associate similar looking

movements using this previous knowledge. This becomes possible because we now have reference points we can apply to the new movement sequences.

On the other hand, if there is a person visiting a contemporary dance class who has never had experience in ballet, they will not have those points of reference. This is why it is important for every person to find their own way to describe and define the movement they are seeing in front of them. In this way, they will learn movement sequences whether they are using ballet references or their own personal references and experiences. This approach will help when learning new practices.

I was lucky to start dancing at an early age and because of that, it now made learning easier. Since I know most of the possible movements already, my dance education is now focusing mainly on memorizing the right order of movements, the transitions of sequences and working on the tools which will enhance my performance on stage. But even now, when I see new movement material, I am able to connect to memories and search for associations, with something from my past – be they memories and associations connected with dance or with life. Sometimes, when learning movement, I am able to associate that movement with the feeling of cold weather, the architecture of a building or other characteristic of a scene from a movie. All these connections to dance movement are determined by where my creativity or mood take me in that moment.

### 3. PROCESS OF LEARNING

#### 3.1. Learning Styles

There is an existing theory about the seven learning styles. “The concept of personalized learning styles dates back to the 1970’s and it has been influencing education ever since. One of the common and widely adopted frameworks today is Neil Fleming’s VARK model. His learning styles are broadly categorized into VARK which stands for visual, auditory, reading and writing, and kinesthetic. Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory known as the seven learning styles is an expanded form of Fleming’s model.” (Conway)

The styles of the theory are:

- Visual learners prefer to see things drawn out in images and symbols.
- Auditory learners prefer to hear information.
- Verbal learners prefer to read and write down information.
- Physical learners prefer to perform a task.
- Logical learners prefer to group information into categories.
- Social learners prefer to learn within a group.
- Solitary learners prefer to learn by themselves.

According to the idea of learning styles, each of us has one preferred way of learning. Nowadays, this theory gets lost among the thousands of misinterpretations. For example, people tend to think that one style they choose will help them learn all kinds of possible information. This was not stated like this in the original theory. Howard Gardner said, “Sometimes people speak about a “visual” learner or an “auditory” learner. The implication is that some people learn through their eyes, others through their ears. This notion is incoherent. Both spatial information and reading occur with the eyes, but they make use of entirely different cognitive faculties... Recognizing this fact, the concept of intelligence does not focus on how linguistic or spatial information reaches the brain – via eyes, ears, hands, it doesn’t matter. What matters is the power of the mental computer, the intelligence, that acts upon that sensory information, once picked up.” (Strauss)

Personally, I do believe that either way could feel more supportive and successful for a person. But it is more efficient to use all the styles at the same time and combine them in different ways.

When attending dance classes, we mostly refer to the other two styles: learning by copying or by going deeper and understanding the origins of a movement. Personally, I found that the idea of the seven learning styles can be split and fit into these two groups. By doing this, it helps to describe ways of learning in a more simplified way.

For the first the day of a learning process, I would organize groups into:

Visual, auditory, verbal and solitary styles of learning by understanding. This would be good for going deeper into the principles and the ideas of given movements.

- Visual. Watch and see the movement first, then try to repeat. Picture with your eyes.
- Auditory. Listen to teachers' instructions. Memorize audible explanation.
- Verbal. Write down and reread what you remember from visual and audible experience.
- Solitary. Try to remember and practice individually. Don't ask for help, do what you can in order to develop your own memory.

Physical, logical and social, could be the group of learning by copying. This option would be good for memorizing faster but superficially.

- Physical – repeat in synchronization with a teacher.
- Logical – search for patterns and connect them into categories.
- Social – sharing with a group and rebuilding steps together.

I do not say that these two groups must be organized in this way. But this is how I feel when I want to learn dance sequences or when I see others learning sequences. For me, the difference between copying and understanding methods is the level of an effort you need to use. The fact is, that by understanding something or some movement, a person has a much higher chance of actually remembering information for a longer time.

To understand the roots and details of certain movements, we need much more concentration, knowledge and enthusiasm. Copying is easier, but it doesn't challenge us to go further in our development. There are situations, though, when copying can be a pathway to a better understanding of a movement. For example, sometimes I struggle with correctly getting rhythms during folk dance class (clapping exercises especially). There are days when even if I listen to the music and try to understand the rhythm, I am not able to start at the right time. In this situation, I would have to follow and copy, knowing that later I would understand by just doing it. It is important to be able to balance two options and to be aware of which methods are being used.

There is one more subtopic relating to the decision of learning movement by copying or by understanding it first. In the first class (especially, but not only), it is helpful to be aware of moving together with a group or independent from the group. When moving within a group, dancers function as a single unit. “That is, when the dancers are aware of the spatial arrangement of the whole group, it is easier to sense themselves as a group body. This, in turn, clarifies group movement themes because individual dancers not only sense their own movement but also comprehend what the group as a whole is doing.” (Brehm and McNett, p. 56)

In this way, all dancers are responsible for the actions and safety of the whole group. This awareness helps the learning process. As the group continues to listen to each other and see each other in present time, they are constantly sharing the material. This act of sharing allows the group to work together in keeping everyone together. If one member of the group gets lost, the dancer can quickly recover by following the group energy and dynamic. By doing this, everyone is working as one collective mind.

If a dancer within the group decides to move independent of the group, they should take responsibility for this decision. Moving independently does not always mean a dancer is applying an entirely different movement material. It is possible they are choosing a different rhythm or taking less/more space.

This way of learning is very much an individual process. The decision to move independently from the group can be a good strategy but if a wrong decision is made, it can cause an injury to other people in class or in performance. “Individual security and self-respect found in movement activities bring strength to a group and contribute to interactive relationships. These experiences in creative movement influence attitude and behavior, helping students to recognize the appropriateness of different types of behavior in life situations.” (Brehm and McNett, p. 23)

### 3.2. Outside and inside space (drawing a map)

In my experience, the first step in the learning process is to find out the directions and levels of the movements. It will be necessary to remember the movement itself yet, the best is to create a simple imaginary map which will orient the body in the required directions and use the map to lead you towards learning the rest of the movement.

I utilize two different maps which I use separately or in combination, depending on the given choreography. If the sequence moves a lot, I use a map of my outside space. If the choreography moves less in space and has many details, I concentrate on my inside space and directions moving through my own body.

### 3.2.1. Outside space

“The direction of the movement results in a pathway. To get a sense of the pathway of a movement, realize that air is a fluid substance and that the body’s movement creates a wake trailing behind it ... The changing position of the body and the direction in which it moves create a shape of the movement itself. Movement in personal space shapes a path through the air. Movement through shared space leaves a trace-form both on the floor (or earth) and in the air.” (Brehm and McNett, p. 54). So, outside space splits into two categories: shared space and personal space.

By shared space, I mean the whole environment or room being used by more than one person. Personal space is the sphere surrounding a person. Rudolf Laban defined this space as the kinesphere – the space which can be easily reached with extended limbs. This is an important difference since directions of movements can exist simultaneously in both spaces, or even go opposite directions (for example: moving to the right according to the shared space, but moving to the left according to one’s own personal space). This is important to know so that it can be applied to the following suggestions.

Working with the idea of the outside space, I imagine using my eyes like I would use a GPS navigation system. I find the starting point and I try to picture, or even name, all the stops and trajectories from the beginning all the way to the destination. With my inner navigation system, I orient myself – according to the room I am in and the direction I am facing. How far do I go from there? Does my *road* change before getting to the next stop? What if I need to pass a bridge before arriving to the next station, or if I go through a tunnel that changes the level of my path and it ends up being different from the one, I started with? If I need to turn, is it a very last second turn before the red light, or does it happen slowly?

From here, I can continue developing the story as far as I wish, depending on what I need. I like using this method for remembering main trajectories because after this type of game, the pathways stay in my mind for a very long time – since I am able to refer to the story I have created.

It is not always necessary to be so creative. Sometimes, it is enough to imagine pathways of movements on the floor and/or establish a connection to actual objects in space. This way, I simply try to name and memorize all the directions, spots and level changes I encounter along the way. For me, personally, remembering directions is a very big help. If I would be, carefully, following movement material with my eyes, then moving through remembered places and levels would, immediately, refresh movement images connected with them.

### 3.2.2. Inside space

In the previous section, I mentioned the body and force elements. Our inside space is the body. It is everything we acknowledge, feel or, maybe, unconsciously, have under our skin and inside the entire body. From this perspective, we use force to move our body away from stillness. Within the learning process, drawing a movement map for the inside space, can be helpful, yet sometimes very complicated. This topic requires that we go deeper into our body understanding and, therefore, into our understanding of the roots of movement:

- Directions inside our body: up, down, left, right, middle line, diagonals, 180-degree turn, etc.
- Body parts: legs, hands, head, chest, hips, feet, hands etc.
- Specifying body: attention to exact muscle, bone, joint, spine, fingers etc.
- Quality of the movement: swing, shake, suspend, collapse, sharp etc.
- Pathway: movement goes straight from A to B, travels in a circle, spiral, etc.
- Observing weight, connection with the surface.
- Observing starting and ending points of a movement. Is there an impulse?
- Observing amount of control and freedom in the movement.
- Does movement feel logical?

When watching movement sequences for the first time, I try to catch some of the details listed above. Which ones I use in a certain moment, depends on the exact given material – always a combination of the parts and never only from the same group. Among all the details, I give special attention to the center of the body. “Each part of the body plays its unique role in forming a coordinated whole body movement. Within the torso...lie several key areas that are crucial for coordination of the whole body. The center of gravity, or center of weight, generally located in the middle of the pelvis while standing, is the point around which the weight of the body balances.” (Brehm and McNett, p. 28)

As soon as we move one part of the body, this action changes the position of the body as well as shifts the weight to a different direction. The center coordinates the entire body movement in order to adapt to the new changes and to stay balanced. In learning new movement, searching for the details which will help organize the entire sequence, is very important. It is equally important to be aware of how an impulse can move the center or maybe how the center can be the first to initiate a movement.

“In addition to the center of gravity, Rudolf Laban (1971) recognized a center of levity, or lightness in the upper torso ... is an instrumental skill that supports the dancer’s ability to express the feeling of lightness by moving with minimal force and delicate discrimination.” (Brehm and McNett, p. 28). I believe that by recognizing both – center of gravity and center of levity – we can take a very big step towards better understanding the entire body. As dancers, our ability to sense and be aware of the shifting of our weight in relationship to the pull of gravity, makes it possible to move safely and efficiently when learning new dance material.

The same happens when using the idea of outside space. I try to name everything I see. Which body part is moving? Where does it travel? How does it travel? Is the movement path drawn outside of my body or does it go through my body? Does it change my connection with the floor? These are all the same questions I ask myself when writing this paper. Concerning this topic, the difference is that I observe only what my body senses. Sometimes I remember movement because it looks and feels illogical and uncomfortable inside my body. We all have a preferred way to move and remember movement. Realizing that a particular movement is challenging for our body or brain, can be a reference point for remembering it.



It applies not just to learning a new single movement, but also, it can be a reference for learning an entire sequence of movement. For example, I can be aware if a sequence builds in a certain way that the energy connects all the movements in a very organic and logical way. Or, on the other hand, I can change the organic flow of the energy and direct it towards an unexpected direction or body part. In doing this, I could give the movement a totally different character and feeling. By researching these different approaches, I allow my senses to help my body and mind memorize new movement and new body coordinations.

### 3.3. Learning by layers

I imagine that movements and a combination of those movements, have several layers. This method requires previous work with the understanding of outside and inside space. Copying would be a very simple approach and it is something I try to avoid. As soon as I understand what happens in my inside space and how it travels out into space, then I can start filling in all the gaps on a movement score.

When seeing a movement sequence for the first time, I try to first picture it. Then, I name the biggest and most simple movements: a step, *plié*, an amazing jump, a slide, a turn.

When I think of transitions between big movements, I think of how I get to where I need to go? It is the same in life – how do I get to where I need to go. Moving through life is like doing a phrase of movement in contemporary dance. When we travel from one place to another in life, we give some moments more energy – running to the bus stop; and other moments, we give less energy – when we sit at the stop waiting for the bus to arrive. The same with dance. When we do a big jump in the air – we use incredible energy. In the moment before the big jump – we use less energy. Yet, throughout all of the movement phrase, we use a constant flow of energy.

Then, numbers come in to the picture. Do I take two steps or three? Sometimes answering this simple question provides important information and knowledge. These simple questions are even more important if later the movement sequence has to be done to the other side. Just by knowing exactly which leg starts and how many times you repeat a step, you can avoid unnecessary confusion.

Going through this process allows me to see all the details. Slide? What kind of slide? Jump? Is the jump with an arm? Where is the arm?

This could be as detailed as necessary. The first layer is more simple and dry. This layer is for catching some details which are not as important but enough to provide a good foundation: head, hand, arm, fall left, shift right, open to left, melt.

This evolves into: head falls front, right hand to the floor, push away and left elbow up, falls to the left, impulse from there to shift to the right, close the body, throw hands to left front diagonal with shifting weight to left leg. Reach away and balance, melt slowly towards the floor.

Even though the organization of these words and thoughts might not make sense to other people, it is important it makes sense to me.

Later, the thinking process for remembering the movement becomes more and more detailed: head falls and rolls to the front, knees a bit bent/soft, weight shifted just a bit to the right so that the right hand finds the floor a bit sooner than the left hand. As soon as right hand receives a bit of the weight, I push the floor away and at the same time left elbow pulls me towards the ceiling. As soon as I rolled up with my body, elbow falls to the left after short suspension, arm releases, torso goes with the fall, weight a bit to the left leg. Just as soon as hand goes through the falling it takes force and falls backwards using the same pathway in a circle above my head and folds with the whole body as soon as weight shifted to the right. Knees soft, etc.

### 3.4. Individual Work (IW)

According to experts, the brain needs up to 20 hours of work and practice in order to be introduced as a new skill. And, in order to become a master in a chosen skill, we need to work on it and practice for 10,000 hours. We can train and develop our learning skills too, but they take time. Part of this time should be spent alone, working on the material independently. Give yourself a chance and the necessary time to settle down, digest and practice. There are different approaches and ways to do individual work, but the main principle stays the same – do it on your own. Especially, when referring to Learning Strategy, it's important to trust and practice your method and train your ability to learn.

#### 3.4.1. Imagery in IW

Using imagery to help develop learning, movement quality and inspiration, is an important tool for every dancer. For me, it is my most favourite and productive way of understanding the work I do in dance.

In using imagery in my work, I imagine what I have seen and done in class. I think of how I have done the movement, how my colleagues have done the movement and how the teachers have shown it – then I use imagery to help me develop the movement to how it should look before performing it.

Imagery technique also doesn't require extra time or space for practice. I apply it during the class, when there is a rest moment and after class. When I leave the studio, I do it on the way home, walking somewhere, riding in a bus, or other activities in normal life. During these times, I dance the material in my head over and over again.

Another layer in this process is taking the comments from the teacher, or analysing difficulties I or my colleagues have had, and I try to transform those comments and difficulties by using the power of imagery.

#### 3.4.2. Theory in IW

If I want to keep choreography in my memory for a longer time, I make notes immediately after class or sometime during the day. Later, if I need to refresh the dance material, I can return to my notes whenever necessary.

During my time in primary school, I wrote amazingly detailed notebooks. The idea for doing this was not to reread the text the next day, or any day in the future. For me, just the fact of writing something down, worked as a way of printing the knowledge into my brain. Sometimes, it was interesting to return to these notes and remember what I did in the classes I attended.

Presently, I am not interested in writing the exact step by step movement material. I rarely take very detailed notes to describe each movement sequence. I, sometimes, wish my old notes had described the feelings I had during that time, or how the energy in class was, or if I learned something new. So now, I write about approaches, principles of a style of movement, or the main ideas used by teachers and artists.

I made a choice to not make notes about sequences yet, I am glad for the experience. I feel it would be good for every dancer to go through their notes when going through their own writing experience. After living that experience, a dancer will know if it is good to keep this learning tool alive, or stop using it. The method of taking notes is a well-known tool which can be used for inspiration or other purposes in dance education.

Another example for notating movement is Labanotation – created by Rudolf Laban. “Labanotation, or Kinetography Laban, is the system of recording movement ... By this now scientifically based method, all forms of movement, ranging from the simplest to the most complex, can be accurately written. Its usefulness to dancers is obvious. The system has also been successfully applied to every field in which there is the need to record motions of the human body – anthropology, athletics, and physiotherapy, to name just a few.” (Hutchinson, p. 18)

One of Laban’s ideas was to create a method of recording movements which would be international and help dance spread among teachers and dancers. That is why Labanotation has a very detailed explanation of its terminology, so that everyone can read and understand each other’s written scores.

Every person has their own way to communicate their strategy for learning. It is important to find one’s own personal language. That is why it is also important to create a terminology they like and understand.

### 3.4.3. Physical IW

Last, but not least, is the importance of physical practice. If the sequence has already been learned to a certain level of precision during the class, then during IW, you can spend time with understanding connections between movements and their exact pathways. Teach your body to feel the choreography and fulfil it with your full attention. In lots of cases, the body will assist in recreating the movement material. It is important to do it with full power and using all the instructions given by the teacher. For example, if I am instructed to do a fall to the floor, I must do it as if I am performing it. By doing the first movement fully, the body will be reminded of what the following movement should be.

It is also common to use video recordings. Students often use them to have a chance to quickly refresh the memory. Personally, I can re-watch recorded video with an intention to analyze my own mistakes or as an imaginary practice (I watch video many times and imagine doing it, but don't do it physically at the same time). It rarely happens that I use video as a tool for learning or relearning material.

## 4. EXPERIENCES

### 4.1. Personal experience

I started dancing at the age of four. Since then, I always had the desire to learn as much as I possibly could – I was very curious! First, I was just curious about dance. Later, when I studied in Tallinn Ballet School, I wanted to be the best. In time, my curiosity made me want to go deeper into learning and understanding everything I was doing.

In Ballet School, I had no idea of the possibilities to analyze dance or my own body. I just wanted to make the movement look correct. Back then, my way of learning movement was by copying it fast and furious. I, then, realized I had a lot of extra time to do something else with the material. Now, my body is able to analyze what the movement is all about and how I can try to execute it better.

Eventually, I started to understand the movement and its principles. I could not identify the terminology or the theory I was using, but already back then, subconsciously, I started to feel that my body had more connections inside than just what was on the outside. I found out it was more than just recreating a shape of movement. It was during that time,

my Learning Strategy started to grow and become alive inside of me. It was only much later when I found out that most of those ideas for analyzing dance, already existed.

## 4.2. Learn through teaching

Tim Minchin, in one of his speeches, proposed nine life lessons, where one of those was an incredibly formulated suggestion. He said, “Be a teacher! Please! Please! Please be a teacher. Teachers are the most admirable and important people in the world. You don’t have to do it forever but if you’re in doubt about what to do be an amazing teacher. Just for your 20s be a teacher ... Even if you’re not a teacher, be a teacher. Share your ideas. Don’t take for granted your education. Rejoice in what you learn and spray it.” (Minchin, 08:33 – 09:03)

My biggest discovery and experience in dance was to start teaching. I am not yet a professional teacher. I don’t know if I do it right and I don’t know if the knowledge I share is somehow useful or interesting. But each time I have a small opportunity to teach, I grab it. No need to be overly ambitious. Even teaching dance as a hobby, or to anyone who is interested, can be a positive thing. Sometimes helping each other in a dance class, can double the knowledge you share.

By teaching, you will learn how to explain and identify what you do. What is it you do? For example, I really enjoy practicing floorwork. I have always felt confident about the principles of this technique. It was a great experience learning and practicing it. I was going with the flow, I just loved doing it. But once I had to tell my students what to do, I got a bit confused. Not because I didn’t know the answer, but because I never had the need to explain it to others. I realized I had to find a way for it to make sense to my students.

By teaching, a person has to go deep into understanding the *what* and *how*. Often, especially if we practice dance in a daily basis, our vision gets blurry. Some things become automatic for our body, and we never think about them again. But students love to ask questions about *how* to do something. They might struggle with a movement which you personally would think is the easiest and most logical thing to do. They will ask you to explain. Before you do it, you will need to find out how to explain it to yourself.

Finally, as soon as you have experience helping students or colleagues, you will also learn how to be a teacher for yourself. It always helps to ask questions and search for answers. Find explanations for the *what* and *why* something is done. Why something is done one way and not the other.

Teaching is one endless research which pushes a person to be thoughtful, to analyze, to be responsible, to build your own opinions and strategies.

### 4.3. Learning Strategy project in the BCDA

My first attempt at sharing the Learning Strategy with others, happened in my first study year in BCDA. I wanted to help my schoolmates in discovering learning tools in the class. The main goal was to practice our concentration, learn to watch carefully, analyze and, later, discuss difficulties we had. In project notes, during each rehearsal, I found myself writing *Be present, Be curious* and *Don't rush!* I have found it is the best way to describe the learning path. All the tasks we practiced were mostly connected to these ideas.

Unlike the work I now do with my students, the BCDA students were not asked to follow step-by-step guidelines. Work in this project was mainly built around the practice and research of different tasks and games. This method, in my opinion, helped raise our ability to concentrate and, at the end, helped us in learning dance sequences. One of the most successful tasks we used was the analyzation and deconstruction of movement. We all could move in the way we wanted to, but at the same time, we had to analyze what exactly we were doing.

In the moment the dancers felt like changing their own movement, they could pick up details from someone else and add it to their own movement. It could be something simple like changing direction, trying a different side, going from left to right, or changing the level and quality of a movement. Not only that, but it could be something other than the actual copying of a shape. This exercise requires lots of presence and concentration. It is not easy to constantly analyze all the movement in our environment. Yet, by doing this, it truly teaches us to watch and see the movement performed by others and to be able to find something in it that catches the eye.

While discussing the Learning Strategy topic with participants, we found the main barrier to learning, was fear. As soon as they felt they did not have enough knowledge to learn the sequence by the end class, they would get distracted easily and lose their interest. So, even while performing the sequence, their thoughts would be on how bad they were performing it. Immediately, they lost concentration in the material itself. It sometimes happens to everyone, yet it is important to catch these feelings and be able to get your focus back to learning.

#### 4.4. Learnings Strategies: the Tallin Ballet School students

My latest experience in teaching and sharing my Learning Strategy ideas was when I began working in the Tallinn Ballet School in Estonia. For the past year, I was teaching floor work basics to students of the contemporary dance faculty in the Ballet School. While doing this, I followed their approaches and, at the same time, tried to lead them with my suggestions in order to help them learn precisely by bringing attention to the details I knew were important.

The students of this school are capable movers, yet the educational system within the school does not prioritize giving them a chance to be responsible and analytical in what they are doing. As a result, these young students do not understand the importance of going deeper into the movement information. In the end, they are unable to digest the movement properly. They want to jump higher and turn faster than their classmates – usually within the framework of the classroom, when a teacher is present. They never work on something individually. They are very good dance students but they are not yet dancers. I experienced this from the perspective of being a student there. Now, I am experiencing it from the perspective of being a teacher there. My opinion has not changed.

I have talked with some of my students in order to know their own strategies and to know if any of my suggestions have made sense to them. I have asked how they learn movement material in class. The answer coming from everyone was – they copied. They have not learned to see with their eyes. Instead, they try to immediately follow with their body. In their experience, their concentration starts to fly away and it is hard to bring it back. It is easier for them to keep busy, physically, by copying the movement.



In my class, I often tell them not to copy, but to see the movement first. Some days it works, other days they seem confused. Another method they use is to learn the big movements and the general transitions and then they add the details later – until the movement becomes what it is supposed to be.

We have also discussed using my Learning Strategy. We, immediately, met with some complications since some of my ideas they were hearing for the very first time. For example, they never thought that creative dance practices could add anything to their knowledge or dancing skills. They did not think about the space around them and rarely could they connect to that possibility. It was the same with the idea of using their inside space. They rarely analyzed what the inside of their bodies are made of and what their bodies were doing when trying to shape a movement.

It was hard to find a common language for understanding. But, to be fair, some of my notes to them were actually being used and applied. We agreed with the idea that having a previous background in dance does add a lot to the ability for learning. They felt it in their daily practices. Also, the students used images which connected them to other experiences or feelings. This helped them in the moment of memorizing new movement sequences.

## 5. CONCLUSION

A new learning process can be successful only if a person spends a big amount of effort and time on it. My own observation is that each student, at the end, uses only what fits and interests them personally, no matter how good the methods are. All possible strategies need time and effort, even simple copying requires time. What is important is to choose a strategy which helps to observe, digest and learn material for a longer period of time – not just for a day.

“Careful observation is essential for everyone concerned with movement, from the small child to the professional performer. The untrained eye will catch only the broad outline of a movement. Only when the eye and the understanding have been trained to recognize differences can the viewer observe the specific details of a performance... As in other fields, a method for the rapid identification of similarities and differences in movement is essential for good learning.” (Hutchinson, p. 20)

In my introduction, I also mentioned a need to learn fast. There is a reason why I didn't discuss it in the main core text? By applying the ideas and concepts from the core text, dancers will discover they are better able to learn faster and more comprehensively. Instead of learning some new information for a short period of time, they will be able to retain movement sequences for much longer. Also, instead of learning something superficially, they will have a deeper understanding of what they are learning. What before, would take them five days to learn, would now take them two days. Of course, in the moment when a sequence of movements is learned, work does not stop. It is at this point when a dancer can continue to work on developing the technical aspects and the quality of performance skills necessary for a life in dance.

I believe, with full consideration of the Learning Strategy topic, it is possible to learn a lot about one's own body, and dance techniques in general. It is a process which can give the dancer new perspectives to learn – how to learn.

Stay present! Stay curious! Stay patient!

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