

Ellen Steinmüller

Lives Transformed Through Dance

A Theoretical Foundation of the Dance United Methodology

Dissertationen der LMU München

Band 102

Lives Transformed Through Dance

A Theoretical Foundation of the Dance United Methodology

von
Ellen Steinmüller



Universitätsbibliothek
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Mit **Open Publishing LMU** unterstützt die Universitätsbibliothek der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München alle Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler der LMU dabei, ihre Forschungsergebnisse parallel gedruckt und digital zu veröffentlichen.

Text © Ellen Steinmüller 2026

Diese Arbeit ist veröffentlicht unter Creative Commons Licence BY 4.0. (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Abbildungen unterliegen ggf. eigenen Lizenzen, die jeweils angegeben und gesondert zu berücksichtigen sind.

Erstveröffentlichung 2026

Zugleich Dissertation der LMU München 2025

Druck und Vertrieb im Auftrag der Autoren und Autorinnen:
Buchschniede von Dataform Media GmbH, Julius-Raab-Straße 8
2203 Großbeersdorf, Österreich

Kontaktadresse nach EU-Produktsicherheitsverordnung:
info@buchschniede.at



Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet abrufbar über <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

Open-Access-Version dieser Publikation verfügbar unter:

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:19-367102>

<https://doi.org/10.5282/edoc.36710>

ISBN 978-3-99192-534-7

Dedicated to
Prof. Dr. Dr. Elisabeth Zwick

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
I Introduction.....	3
1 Overview.....	4
2 Personal Perspective and Motivation.....	9
II Dance United as a unique Case of Community Dance Practice ...	17
1 Case Study Research Design.....	19
2 Case Study Research Process.....	24
2.1 Contextualising the Case.....	26
2.2 Defining the Case.....	28
2.3 Identifying the Core Concepts of the Methodology.....	33
2.3.1 Analysis Process of Document Data.....	35
2.3.2 Analysis Process of Interview Data.....	40
2.4 Developing a Theoretical Foundation.....	46
3 Data Validation Strategies and Ethical Considerations.....	49
III British Community Dance in Social Inclusion.....	55
1 Overview of British Community Dance.....	55
1.1 Origins, Evolution and Socio-Political Context.....	56
1.2 Defining Key Principles.....	60
2 Community Dance within the Social Inclusion Sector.....	64
2.1 Idiosyncrasies of Practice.....	65
2.2 Principles and Methods of Best Practice.....	67
IV The Work of Dance United.....	75
1 A Biographic Account.....	75
1.1 Pre-Incorporation – Origins in Ethiopia from 1995 to 2000.....	76
1.2 The First Phase – Working on Three Strands from 2000 to 2006 ...	80
1.3 The Second Phase – Focus on Criminal Justice from 2007 to 2010.....	89
1.4 The Third Phase – Evolving the Artistic Vision from 2011 to 2014.....	97
1.5 Post-Closure – Continuing the Legacy after 2014.....	105

2	Evidencing the Methodology – Towards a Research-Based Practice.....	111
2.1	The First Phase – Project Evaluations.....	112
2.2	The Second Phase – Making a Case for the Academy	118
2.3	The Third Phase – Insights into Cause and Effect.....	127
V	The Core Concepts of the Dance United Methodology.....	137
1	Defining the Dance United Methodology.....	137
1.1	A Historically Developed Practice.....	139
1.2	A Comprehensive, Practice-Based, and Flexible Guide to ‘Good Teaching’	144
1.3	A Shared Ethos with Human Values at the Heart	149
1.4	Defending an Idealistic Approach	151
2	The Core Concepts in Theory – Analysis of the Written Framework... ..	155
2.1	‘Working to Highest Artistic Standards’	157
2.2	Creating a Safe Space for Realising Potential	159
2.2.1	Containing and Holding.....	160
2.2.2	Facilitating Learning and Growth.....	162
2.3	Creating an Inclusive Space with the Person at the Centre	165
2.3.1	Inclusive Terms of Participation.....	165
2.3.2	Employing a Person-Centric Approach	166
2.3.3	Tailoring Approach to Specific Needs.....	167
2.4	Working as a Dance Company	168
2.5	Employing Principles of ‘Good Teaching’	170
2.5.1	Thorough Planning and Preparation	171
2.5.2	Clear, Transparent, and Positive Communication	173
2.5.3	Setting Clear Objectives.....	174
2.5.4	Achievability	176
2.5.5	Accessibility	178
2.5.6	Differentiation	179
2.5.7	Variation	180
2.6	Delivering Dance-Specific Learning Content	181
2.6.1	Teaching Basic Dance and Performance Skills	182
2.6.2	Working with a Tailored Choreography.....	184
3	The Core Concepts in Action – Analysis of Expert Interviews.....	186
3.1	Action Enriching Core Concepts in Theory	187

3.1.1	'Working to Highest Artistic Standards' in Action	187
3.1.2	A Safe Space for Realising Potential in Action	192
3.1.3	An Inclusive Space with the Person at the Centre in Action	203
3.1.4	Working as a Dance Company in Action – Creating a Communal Space	207
3.1.5	Delivering Dance-Specific Learning Content in Action	211
3.2	Action Expanding Beyond Core Concepts in Theory.....	214
3.2.1	Believing in Everyone's Extraordinary Potential	215
3.2.2	Active Implementation by Artists 'of Calibre'	217
3.2.3	'Transforming Lives Through Dance'	225
VI	A Theoretical Foundation of the Dance United Methodology	235
1	Integrating the Core Concepts in Theory and in Action	235
1.1	'Transforming Lives Through Dance'	237
1.2	'Working to Highest Artistic Standards'	238
1.3	Believing in Everyone's Extraordinary Potential	241
1.4	Creating a Safe Space for Realising Potential	243
1.5	Creating an Inclusive Space with the Person at the Centre	246
1.6	Creating a Communal Space as a Dance Company	247
1.7	Employing Principles of 'Good Teaching'	249
1.8	Delivering Dance-Specific Learning Content	252
1.9	Active Implementation by Artists 'of Calibre'	254
2	Developing a Theoretical Model of the Dance United Methodology	257
2.1	The Aim of 'Transforming Lives Through Dance'	259
2.2	The Objective of 'Working to Highest Artistic Standards'	266
2.3	The Guiding Value of Believing in Everyone's Extraordinary Potential	281
2.4	The Strategy of a Holistic Learning Environment.....	288
2.5	The Method of an Integrated Pedagogical Framework.....	295
3	Building Relationships to Existing Theory	299
3.1	Transformative Learning Theory as an Applicable Theory.....	299
3.2	Transformative Learning through Dance and Performance.....	305
3.3	Artistic Excellence as a Catalyst for Transformative Learning	312
3.4	Potentiality as a Guiding Value of Transformative Learning	316

3.5 Transformative Learning within a Holistic Learning Environment.....	321
3.6 Transformative Learning through an Integrated Pedagogical Framework.....	325
VII Discussion – A wider application of findings?	331
1 Potential Contributions to Theory	333
2 Potential Contributions to Practice.....	340
VIII Conclusion.....	347
1 Limitations.....	348
2 Further Recommendations.....	352
Bibliography.....	357
List of Figures	379
Appendix A – Evidence Trails of Data Analysis.....	381
Appendix A1 – Evidence Trail for Defining the Methodology.....	381
Appendix A2 – Evidence Trail for Core Concepts in Theory.....	383
Appendix A3 – Evidence Trail for Core Concepts in Action	386
Appendix A4 – Evidence Trail for Integration of Core Concepts.....	390
Appendix B – Interview Guidelines.....	397
Appendix B1 – General Interview Guideline.....	397
Appendix B2 – Interview Guideline for Historical Perspective.....	399
Appendix B3 – Interview Guideline for Organisational Perspective ...	400
Appendix B4 – Interview Guideline for Practice Perspective	401
Appendix B5 – Interview Guideline for External Perspective.....	402

Acknowledgements

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
John Donne*

I am no island and this doctoral dissertation would not have been possible without the generous collective effort and support from the professional and personal community around me. So, I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who has been part of this incredible journey in one way or another.

First of all, I dedicate this dissertation to the loving memory of Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Zwick, who has supported me in reconnecting to my German academic roots, unwaveringly believed in my scholarly potential, and inspired me to set out onto this journey. Her spirit of uncompromising human values and infinite wisdom has accompanied me throughout every step. I know she would be proud.

I owe the completion of my doctoral journey to the invaluable and steadfast support, trust, and encouragement of Prof. Dr. Alexandra Kertz-Welzel. She not only took over the role of my primary supervisor but most importantly encouraged me in bravely reassessing and redirecting my research, seeing me through choppy waters of doubt and uncertainty. Her tireless nudging, thoughtful questioning, and constructive critique were indispensable in shaping the trajectory of my work and bringing it to full fruition.

I also want to express my heartfelt gratitude towards Prof. Dr. Ulrich Heimlich, who recognised the potential of my research from its initial inception and has not tired of accompanying it as a secondary supervisor with his inspiring expertise for inclusion and passion for the arts in education. He persistently reminded me to take courage in the face of adversities and to believe in the worthiness of my endeavour.

My research would have not yielded the results it did without the generous support from my former Dance United colleagues. Their pro-

found passion for the art of dance and their unwavering belief in the greatest potential of people to be their best selves, has been an endless source of inspiration throughout all of my professional undertakings, including this one. I would like to specifically thank Andrew Coggins for generously sharing his invaluable perspective as a founding member of the company and for the innumerable stimulating conversations throughout this process.

I am grateful to all my family and friends who have patiently persevered throughout my social hiatus and who never ceased to offer their unconditional support in many which ways. I deeply appreciate their understanding and encouragement, helping me maintain focus and personal balance throughout this demanding journey.

Last but not least, I am deeply grateful to my husband, Marc Allen, who has been my critical echo chamber, my compassionate think tank and my reliable rock. He never failed to believe that I am capable of this and wholeheartedly understands my deep passion for this work.

I had the great privilege to be supported, believed in, and encouraged to see and realise my potential throughout this process. From the work I do, I know that this is not a given and something I seek to facilitate for others. I hope this piece of writing is an inspiration for everyone who reads it—to never underestimate the dormant potentiality in each and every one of us and to recognise the power we unleash when we step into the best versions of ourselves. Dance is my pathway into this, but I am certain the principles explored here can guide many other meaningful and worthwhile transformative journeys.

I Introduction

All dances make a statement and begin with the question, what do I want to say in this dance? In much the same way, the qualitative researcher begins with a similar question: What do I want to know in this study? (Janesick, 1994, p. 210).

My doctoral research views dance, particularly contemporary dance, as a powerful catalyst for personal and social transformative change. From this perspective, I scholarly examine the Methodology¹ of Dance United as a unique case of community dance practice in the social inclusion² sector. As a framework of practice, it engages vulnerable and socially excluded populations such as at-risk youth, people in the criminal justice system, and individuals experiencing mental health conditions in intensive, performance-led contemporary dance programmes. By bridging artistic and social practices, it fosters artistic innovation while instigating processes of personal development and social empowerment. Over time, the company's distinct way of working has been captured in a written framework of key features and principles. Numerous studies have documented and evidenced the positive and often life-changing outcomes of the work (Dance United, 2014c; Miles & Strauss, 2008; Optimity Advisors, 2016; van Poortvliet et al., 2010, pp. 70-72). Despite this extensive evidence of impact, the Methodology as a framework of practice has never been empirically investigated or analysed to establish a theoretical foundation of its core concepts.

1 The term "Methodology" used in this context is understood as a set of methods constituting a framework of practice. This is in line with Dance United's use of the term for internal and external communications (see V.1). To avoid confusion with the research methodology applied, the term is capitalised when describing the specific approach employed by Dance United.

2 The term "social inclusion" used in this context is understood through its socio-political application in the United Kingdom, specifically within the Labour government welfare reforms from 1997 onwards. For a comprehensive summary of these policies as a whole, see Powell (2000). Chapter III provides a detailed definition of the term.

My doctoral thesis endeavours to close this research gap by identifying the core concepts of the Methodology and establishing their dynamic interrelationships in a theoretical model. By linking this to relevant existing theories, I achieve the envisaged theoretical foundation of the approach. My research not only strengthens the Methodology and its practical application but also provides an exploratory contribution to theory development in community dance, validating its potential as a catalyst for personal and social transformation.

The following chapter provides an introductory overview of my doctoral study. Firstly, I discuss its foundational background and context, followed by the research problem and gap it addresses along with the research aims, objectives and questions it sets. I conclude with its significance and relevance, as well as its limitations (see I.1). Secondly, I outline my personal perspective and motivation for conducting this research (see I.2). I have worked for the company for several years, gaining considerable experience of the Methodology in action. This has not only shaped my understanding of the approach but also fundamentally influenced my professional identity and biography.

1 Overview

All of my professional practice is underpinned by a foundational conviction about the transformative power of dance. It fuelled my performance work as a contemporary dancer, motivated my training and practice as a dance movement psychotherapist, and brought me to becoming a community dance artist and choreographer. Throughout my career path, I have been privileged to support a multitude of learning journeys towards the realisation of potential, lighting sparks of confidence and sowing seeds of self-belief through my passion for dance. The opportunity to accompany individuals throughout processes of self-discovery and self-realisation remains a constant source of professional inspiration and fulfilment for me. As I have previously reflected (Steinmüller, 2023, p. 76), nowhere have I witnessed this transformative potential of dance more fully realised in embodied action than in my work with the pioneering organisation Dance United.

Though formerly established in 2000, Dance United's roots extend back to the mid-1990s, when a collaborative performance project with 120 street and working children brought together its founding members: Andrew Coggins, a TV producer; Royston Maldoom, a British dance artist and choreographer; and his colleague Mags Byrne, a dancer, choreographer, and teacher (Maldoom, 2010, pp. 211-231). In its early years, the work of the company concentrated on international projects, initiatives to foster community cohesion in Northern Ireland, and programmes within the criminal justice system in England. What began as project-based work in prisons gradually developed into more sustained provisions for young people on parole, resulting in the launch of the Academy Programme in Bradford in 2005, which subsequently extended to Winchester and London. In later years, the company further broadened its activities to include the mental health sector. Despite its proven success rate and track record evidenced by evaluations and research (see IV.2), Dance United ceased operations in 2014 due to funding challenges.

Motivated by substantial impact evaluation on the Academy Programme (Miles & Strauss, 2008), the organisation formalised its approach into the Dance United Methodology as written documents, with an aim to acquire essential funding, as well as to build networks, partnerships, and training for artists. The Methodology encompasses a catalogue of specific proactive strategies and key features, guiding the artistic development, planning, and delivery process. Although not unique or necessarily novel, in its entirety it describes a specific and pioneering approach of engaging marginalised and vulnerable populations in a process of intensive contemporary dance training and performance, realising the company's core aim "to advance dance as a tool for personal development and social change" (Dance United, 2003, p. 3).

Throughout their operations, Dance United consistently engaged in evaluations of the effects of their work on participants, social context, and even its wider socio-economic impact (van Poortvliet et al., 2010, pp. 70-72). Despite the substantial body of evidence supporting the approach's effectiveness, the company never conducted a thorough scholarly examination to establish a theoretical foundation of the Methodology. This lack of theoretical underpinning is mirrored within

the wider sector of community dance. Although substantial effort to develop comprehensive professional frameworks, standards, and qualifications of practice is evident within community dance practice in the UK (Bartlett, 2006; Bartlett & Stenton, 2008, 2009; Craddock & Willmore, 2011; Leatherdale & Stenton, 2024), the professional field generally lacks a theory base. As Sheppard and Broughton (2020) identified in their recent systematic literature review on applications within the health and wellbeing sector, “the current body of literature lacks clear theoretical bases and consistent methodological approaches” (p. 15). Due to its written formalisation and robust research base, the Dance United Methodology offers such a consistent framework of practice and thus a unique opportunity to examine and develop possible theoretical underpinnings.

Consequently, the primary aim of my doctoral research study is to establish a theoretical foundation of the Dance United Methodology. In order to accomplish this, I pursue the following objectives. Firstly, I unveil implicit values, principles, and key characteristics of the Dance United Methodology, explicitly identifying its core concepts using data from both its written formalisation and expert interviews with relevant stakeholders. Secondly, by analysing the interrelationships of the core concepts, I develop a theoretical model that is subsequently related to existing relevant theory. I achieve this through applying a robust qualitative research process embedded in the overall research design of a case study. This enables me to present a thorough theoretical foundation of the Dance United Methodology, providing an explorative contribution to community dance theory in general and its practice in the social inclusion sector in particular.

In close relation to my research aims and objectives, my research process is guided by the following questions. My primary research question concerns the overall purpose and asks: what is the theoretical foundation of the Dance United Methodology? My secondary research questions align with my underlying goals. In asking what the core concepts of the Dance United Methodology are and how the core concepts relate to each other, I achieve a heuristic approximation of theoretically conceptualising this specific approach. The question of what meaningful links exist between the core concepts of the Dance United Method-

ology and relevant existing theory allows me to embed this conceptualisation in its theoretical situatedness.

Especially in light of the overt lack of a coherent theory base in community dance, my doctoral research constitutes a vital contribution to the field. While Dance United's work has been robustly documented and evaluated for its impact, my research addresses the gap of a missing comprehensive theoretical analysis. By identifying, conceptualising, and theoretically embedding the core concepts that define the Methodology, I strengthen the approach and inform its practical applications. I contribute to the broader field of community dance by developing a theoretical foundation of a successful and impactful way of working, which potentially serves as a framework for future studies and professional practice development in the sector, particularly in the social inclusion context. Through my examination of Dance United's Methodology, I bridge practical dance provisions and academic theory, enriching both areas and fostering a closer exchange between the two.

Although my research holds considerable potential to make the above contributions, it is important to also acknowledge its limitations. While centring my research on the specific case of the Dance United Methodology provides depth to my analysis, it may limit the generalisability and transferability of my findings to the wide, diverse and complex field of community dance practices. This, in turn, may constrain the breadth of my theoretical contributions to the field. Additionally, the mostly retrospective³ and subjective nature of my data affects the objectivity of my findings. This potential introduction of bias is further heightened by my professional involvement with the company. I endeavour to address these concerns through academic rigour by applying a robust research design and process, acknowledging the boundaries of my research, situating my findings within the specific context of Dance United, and ensuring transparency by reflecting on how my personal perspective and involvement may shape the findings.

³ Since Dance United ceased its operations in 2014, I rely mostly on historical data and documentation. Apart from Helen Linsell, the Artistic Director of Dance United Yorkshire, and the founding members Royston Maldoom and Mags Byrne, who discuss their current practical implementation of the approach, all interviewees rely on their memories of their experiences with the work.

After providing a foundational understanding of my research process, including my personal epistemological position, in this chapter, I proceed to outline my research methodology in Chapter II, comprised of three sub-chapters. The first sub-chapter provides a thorough description and extensive rationale for employing a case study design. The second sub-chapter offers a comprehensive overview of each step of the research process. I conclude this discussion with the third sub-chapter, outlining the applied data validation strategies and ethical considerations.

Chapter III contextualises the unique case of Dance United within the practice context of community dance in the United Kingdom. As the work of Dance United specifically serves marginalised and vulnerable populations, I focus this discussion on practice within the social inclusion sector, with a particular emphasis on existing methods and principles of best practice. This not only situates my case within its practice field but also establishes the appropriate context and reference point for my research.

Chapter IV provides a comprehensive account of the work of Dance United. By describing of the company's historical development alongside the evolution of its engagement with evaluation and research, I extensively define the specificities of the case as the object of my research and thus define the distinct boundaries around my case.

In Chapter V, I present the results of my empirical research process. As I work within the epistemological premise of constructivism, it is vital to first establish a working definition of the Dance United Methodology. I proceed by separately presenting my findings regarding the core concepts of the Methodology from the document data and the interview data.

Chapter VI is concerned with establishing a theoretical foundation for the Methodology. To achieve this, I first integrate my findings from documents and interviews into a holistic understanding of each core concept. I then develop a theoretical model of the Methodology in its entirety by setting these into dynamic relation with each other. Building relationships between my theoretical model and relevant existing theory constitutes the final step in providing a theoretical foundation for the approach.

Chapter VII discusses my findings as contributions to theory and practice, relating them to a tentative exploration of wider applications beyond the boundaries of my case to community dance, particularly within the social inclusion sector. My doctoral thesis concludes with Chapter VIII, which discusses the limitations of my research endeavour and provides an outlook for recommended future and next steps.

2 Personal Perspective and Motivation

To ensure transparency and increase the objectivity of my findings, it is vital to reflectively outline my personal epistemological position towards the Methodology and my professional experience of its practice. Informed by my background as an artist, educator, and therapist, I engage with the Dance United Methodology through a unique interdisciplinary lens, which both reflects and guides my theoretical orientation towards the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 85). Working for Dance United had a profound impact on my professional biography and identity, shaping my perspective on dance as a catalyst for personal development, growth, and change. As Janesick notes, “because of our point of view, we construct and frame a question for inquiry” (1994, p. 210). I recognise that this connection with the work inevitably informs the way I approach my research endeavour. In the following, I thus transparently acknowledge how my academic perspective and prior professional experiences may influence my research questions, the framing of my inquiry, and the interpretation of my data.

Prior to joining Dance United, my professional biography encompassed training and performance as a contemporary dancer, academic study in pedagogics and psychology, and qualification and practise of dance movement therapy. Throughout my dance training from 2001 to 2002 at the Laban Centre London, my understanding of contemporary dance practice was considerably expanded beyond the professional training and performance context. Imbued with Rudolf Laban’s unique philosophical and theoretical framework based on his fundamental principle of making dance accessible to all (Laban, 1975, 1980), my training sparked a profound interest in the therapeutic and educational applications of dance as a catalyst for personal growth and devel-

opment. My studies in pedagogics and psychology at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich provided the robust academic foundation I required to further pursue this newly found professional interest. With a particular focus on aesthetic experiences within education, I connected my passion for the arts with a theoretical understanding of its application within learning and growth. Further bridging theory and practice, I completed a two-year Master's degree in Dance Movement Therapy at Goldsmiths College, University of London, in 2006. My academic learning, with a focus on psychodynamic theories combined with practical experiences through placements, provided a rich and comprehensive understanding of the psychotherapeutic applications of dance as a tool for healing. I subsequently practised as a dance movement therapist as well as a teacher of dance from 2006 to 2010, primarily focusing on the work with vulnerable and marginalised young people in educational and communal settings in urban London. My training, studies, and professional practice provided a robust theoretical and practical foundation to understand dance within its educational and therapeutic applications as an intra- and interpersonal catalyst for learning, healing, and development. Moreover, having grown up in a privileged, predominantly white rural context, my professional experiences in London profoundly expanded my cultural and social understanding of the lived realities of inequality and marginalisation. Without this formative learning, my ability to sensitively engage with this approach and, in turn, my research endeavour would have been limited.

I came across the work of Dance United throughout my training as a dance movement therapist in 2005, when I watched the acclaimed documentary *Rhythm Is It* on Royston Maldoom's large-scale performance project in collaboration with the Berlin Philharmonics. I not only felt deeply inspired by the film but also strongly called to this practice, intuitively knowing that this was what I wanted to do. As a professionally trained dancer and performer, I profoundly missed the artistic dimension within my therapeutic practice, and I saw a unique opportunity to unite the art of dance with my therapeutic expertise in the work I witnessed in the documentary. My inquiry into the project brought me to the work of Dance United in the UK and constituted the start of my journey towards working with the company.