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# **‘Stretch’ Cognitively and Physically: A Research on Older Adults’ Experiences of Taking Ballet Classes as an Anti-aging Method**

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## **ABSTRACT**

With an ageing population, more older Australians are experiencing retirement and are spending more time engaging in leisure activities such as recreational dance classes. There are many opportunities in Australia for older adults to undertake structured dance participation through dedicated ‘seniors’ or ‘over fifties’ activities. These include dance classes, workshops, social dance events, and rehearsals that lead to performance outcomes. The dance genres that these activities draw from include ballet,<sup>1</sup> tap and jazz dance,<sup>2</sup> contemporary dance,<sup>3</sup> ballroom dance,<sup>4</sup> clogging and square dance,<sup>5</sup> and ‘mature dance’.<sup>6</sup> In this article, we draw on a larger study that examined recreational ballet dancing through a case study of Queensland Ballet’s weekly Ballet for Seniors class (see Ali-Haapala, Moyle, & Kerr, 2018). This research had three points of focus: active older adults’ motivations to participate in recreational ballet classes, their perceived wellbeing as a result of ballet class participation, and pedagogical strategies for teachers leading ballet classes for active older adults.

## **KEYWORDS**

*Ballet; Challenge; Dance; Older adults; Play; Pleasure.*

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### **1. Introduction**

Qualitative research has focused on such dance practices as social dance and ballroom dance (Cooper & Thomas, 2002; Skinner, 2013; Stevens-Ratchford, 2016), modern sequence dance (Cooper & Thomas, 2002), line dance (Joseph & Southcott, 2019), shag dance (Brown et al., 2008), and square dance (Schneider & McCoy, 2018). This literature illustrates the pleasure of being challenged by dance and overcoming these challenges (Schneider & McCoy, 2018; Stevens-Ratchford, 2016). For example, Schneider and McCoy (2018) found that learning a relatively complex dance activity ‘is in itself a rewarding pleasure for older adults’ (p. 59). Other

aspects of dancing that have been associated with pleasure are: socialising (Brown et al., 2008; Cooper & Thomas, 2002; Schneider & McCoy, 2018; Stevens-Ratchford, 2016), humour (Cooper & Thomas, 2002), the music played in dance sessions (Schneider & McCoy, 2018), dressing up for dancing (Cooper & Thomas, 2002; Schneider & McCoy, 2018), and viewing oneself as a dancer (Brown et al., 2008).<sup>7</sup>

The pleasure of dancing ballet, however, has received little critical inquiry. This may be due to a dominant academic discourse which has concentrated on the harmful aspects of ballet, such as body image distortions and eating disorders, body overuse, authoritarian teaching approaches, and traditional gender roles (Kolb & Kalogeropoulou, 2012). However, by focusing on the harmful effects, this literature has ignored an 'essential feature' of ballet for many dancers: pleasure (Kolb & Kalogeropoulou, 2012, p. 108). The limited literature available reports several pleasures experienced by adult recreational ballet dancers (Houston & McGill, 2013; Kolb & Kalogeropoulou, 2012; Whiteside & Kelly, 2016).

The existing literature accounts of several pleasures emanating from recreational dancing. The pleasure of dancing ballet may derive from the intent to dance for leisure when even such aspects as authoritative teaching, discipline and physical pain can become enjoyable. Social pleasures of forming acquaintances and friendships, and associated social status, such as knowing ballet vocabulary and feeling part of an 'elite' art form, were also parts of participation in ballet. Most notably, however, the pleasures of being physically and cognitively challenged and the implicit competitiveness identified by Kolb and Kalogeropoulou (2012) offer a point of departure for this current article.

## **2. Methods**

The findings presented in this article are drawn from a research project entitled Ballet Moves for Adult Creative Health, a partnership between Queensland Ballet and Queensland University of Technology (see Ali-Haapala et al., 2018). The research project aimed to identify older adult motivations to participate in recreational ballet classes, their perceived wellbeing as a result of dancing, and appropriate pedagogy for active older adult participants. The research design consisted of action research cycles within the context of Queensland Ballet's weekly Ballet for Seniors class in Brisbane, Australia, from July to October 2017.

Action research<sup>9</sup> was employed to provide an opportunity to test modified approaches to ballet pedagogy in partnership with the Ballet for Seniors teachers. As an approach to knowledge creation, action research 'brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions' (Bradbury, 2015, p. 1). Action research is, in part, characterised by an intent to understand and improve practice, researching 'with' the community that is being studied, and cyclical patterns of planning, acting and reflecting (Bradbury, 2015, p. 2). This research method assisted us to understand how elements of ballet class affected the experience of participants principally, and secondarily, teachers' experiences. The choice of predominately qualitative methods was consistent with some previous research on older adult dancers (see Brown et al., 2008; Joseph & Southcott, 2019; Stevens-Ratchford, 2016).

Class participant focus groups, class observation and teacher interviews were the primary data collection tools that have informed the current article. Additional tools, including a wellbeing questionnaire and teacher workshop, were used in the research project but did not inform the results presented in the current article.

## **3. Participants**

With ethical approval from Queensland University of Technology, existing Ballet for Seniors teachers and participants were invited to take part in the research alongside their regular involvement in weekly classes. Ten class participants agreed to participate in the study. They were women between 46 and 82 years of age who were in paid employment (6) or retirement (4). Most class participants had previous dancing experience,

with seven having learned ballet when they were girls and/or young women. Therefore, Ballet for Seniors marked a return to dancing ballet for most of the participants. The class participants have been given pseudonyms in this article for their anonymity.

The class had a rotating roster of teachers. Three teachers agreed to participate in the research and to be identified in publications: Tamara Zurvas, Melissa Tattam and Martha Godber. These are teachers with extensive ballet experience who taught into Queensland Ballet's Public Dance Classes programme.

#### **4. Data Collection and Analysis Class Participant Focus Group**

Focus groups were undertaken with groups of five class participants to provide ample opportunity for participants to contribute to the discussion. These focus groups were scheduled immediately following select classes in Action Cycles One and Three. The intent was to develop an understanding of the class participants' experiences of ballet classes. The focus group moderation adopted a structured approach (Morgan, 2008, p. 354) where the researcher used a schedule of set questions to guide conversation about a defined research agenda and asked impromptu followup questions for comments that were not clear or seemed important for the research. It is the class participants' perspectives that lead the current article.

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, the resulting data first underwent verbatim transcription undertaken by the Lead Researcher, with the aid of research assistants. The data were coded against the research questions (e.g. 'class content', 'class context', 'pedagogy'), and then coded to identify interesting features of the data (e.g. codes within 'class content' included 'wanting more challenge' and 'achievable movements'). These codes were then grouped into themes (e.g. 'difficulty' within 'class content'). At the end of the analysis, the themes were reviewed and defined. The current article focuses on one theme that emerged from the dataset: challenging movements and sequences were pleasurable to the class participants and led to an increased sense of achievement.

#### **5. Class Observation**

Ten Ballet for Seniors classes were observed throughout the action research cycles to gain firsthand experience of how classes operated. Field notes were guided by a framework consisting of 'class context' (i.e. observations about the room and objects within it), 'class content' (i.e. exercises, movements within exercises, time spent on each section of class), 'teacher/pedagogy' (i.e. teacher actions and instructions), and 'participants' (i.e. participant actions and interactions). These field notes were written using an iPad during classes, then expanded within 48 hours of each class. At the end of the action cycles, a comparative analysis was undertaken to identify commonalities between classes in each action cycle. This information contextualised the participants' focus group discussions.

#### **6. Teacher Interview**

The teachers participated in one-hour semi-structured interviews (see Ayres, 2012). The topics discussed included: the teachers' background and experience (Action Cycle One), teaching intentions for Ballet for Seniors (Action Cycle One), approaches to class content and pedagogy (Action Cycle One), and reflections on implementing the modified Ballet for Seniors framework (Action Cycle Three). Like the researchers' observation, the teacher interviews were another data source that contextualised the experience of class participants by unpacking the intent and logic behind the classes. The teacher interviews were analysed with the same method used for the class participant focus groups.

## 7. 'Ballet For Seniors'

Based on the observations, Ballet for Seniors classes followed many ballet class conventions. The exercises aligned with the standard ballet class structure of barre exercises followed by centre practice. However, the centre practice deviated from a typical ballet class: there was often a choreographic sequence included in centre practice and there were no turning or allegro (jumping) exercises. The movements at the start of the observation in Action Cycle One appeared to be a basic, beginner level. Barre exercises (beginning exercises where dancers hold onto a wooden bar for support) often used a basic en croix pattern (movements are performed in the directions of front, side and back). Centre practice involved legwork à terre (movements where both feet stay in contact with the floor). In contrast, the movements during later observations in Action Cycle Three had increased the level of difficulty. New en l'air positions (movements where one foot is off the floor, therefore, the dancer balances on one leg), such as arabesque (one leg lifted and extended behind the body) and attitude (one leg lifted and bent behind the body), were included in centre practice.

The teaching was observed to be flexible and responsive to the class participants. Class participants were positioned as the experts of their bodies and given the power to make decisions about their participation. The teachers positioned themselves as ballet experts who offered exercises and technical information. However, the class atmosphere was relaxed allowing for jokes and laughter. The teachers expressed intentions to create pleasurable ballet experiences for the class participants through light exercise and fun. For example, one teacher explained: 'it's physical activity to the point of just feeling wellness, I guess. So it's not strenuous on the body' (Tamara Zurvas, teacher, Action Cycle One).

## 8. Challenges within Ballet Class

Class participants reported a clear desire to be challenged within the ballet classes (Action Cycle One) and experienced a greater sense of achievement and satisfaction as a result of being challenged (Action Cycle Three). We identified nine challenging elements for the class participants. These elements were categorised as cognitive challenges and physical challenges and were the skills that class participants used to compare their achievements to their prior performance. Cognitive challenges were most commonly discussed, which suggested that ballet classes might, first, be considered challenging for the ageing brain, and, second, for the ageing body. This finding expands the previous research emphasis on physical trials faced by older adult dancers (Kolb & Kalogeropoulou, 2012). The cognitive challenges identified by the participants were: remembering movement sequences; navigating changes in directions; learning choreography; a fast teaching pace; and changing the dance studio which requires class participants to reorient themselves in a new space.

By remembering movement sequences, the class participants practiced their memory. This included recalling steps that were taught within a class (e.g. performing a movement sequence after the teacher has set the exercise) and recalling steps from previous weeks, as there were often repeated movement sequences from one week to the next. For example, Margaret explained: 'the holding of the pattern, taking in that information and then getting yourself going with the music, and even remembering what's the first step. I can never remember what's the first step of anything' (Class participant, Action Cycle Three). Changing directions – moving in a particular direction (e.g. left or right) and the direction that class participants would face (e.g. en face – facing directly forward – and croisé – facing in an angled direction) – were particularly challenging for some participants. In addition, the class participants often mentioned choreography as being difficult. It appeared that choreographic sequences involved a culmination of challenges, as is discussed below.

In Action Cycle One, the pace at which the teachers set exercises and gave information was initially discussed as an element that could be faster: 'Not so much the tempo, but it's the learning a lot more quickly' (Robyn, class participant, Action Cycle One). The class participants felt that they could learn at a quicker pace and did

not require extensive demonstrations before performing exercises to music. In Action Cycle One, the pace of teaching was comfortable for the class participants, often involving an exercise being talked through and/or demonstrated two to three times. The later teaching pace in Action Cycle Three was quicker, with less repetitive demonstration of the exercises: 'It's sort of more, show us once and then you go through it' (Julie, class participant, Action Cycle Three).

The physical challenges that were identified included balance, cardiovascular exertion, and group work (i.e. group formations). While balance has often been a focus of physical health research for older adults (see Hwang & Braun, 2015), balance was only mentioned as a challenge twice in the current study (once by a participant, and once by a teacher). This suggested balance was a less prominent challenge compared to the cognitive challenges that were mentioned frequently. However, it is worth noting that balance was regularly exercised during classes.

Ballet movements were also identified to provide physical challenges, but the participants lacked specificity about which movements were challenging and which were not.<sup>10</sup> Margaret did, however, express a distinction between performing a ballet movement with and without technical accuracy:

[. . .] any of those exercises that you try to do you can realise that there are so many areas that when you're doing it, you're not doing it well. So, are your feet flat? Are your knees open? Is your back straight? Are your shoulders straight? You know, even within a small plié, rond de jambe thing, you know, you see her [the teacher] do it so beautifully and so fluently, and we've got a long way to go. Laughs. (Margaret, class participant, Action Cycle Three)

Ballet for Seniors classes presented cognitive and physical challenges, with the number of cognitive challenges reportedly outweighing the physical challenges. It may have been the case that while the teachers could exclude ballet's more physically complex movements, the underlying conventions of ballet involve layered cognitive processes such as remembering moving sequences, navigating direction changes and coordinating the timing of steps with music.

## **9. Desirable and Pleasurable Challenges**

Following Kolb and Kalogeropoulou (2012), we suggest that when the class participants were challenged they felt the pleasure of competitive play, specifically the enjoyable feeling of 'surpassing their own prior performance' (Kolb & Kalogeropoulou, 2012, p. 118). This desire to be challenged presented very early in the data collection process, as it was the first point raised by class participants in Action Cycle One focus groups. For example, the participants discussed wanting to be 'extended' through ballet's technique and even 'pushed' by the teachers to work harder: 'it would be nice to be able to stretch up and outwards' (Elizabeth, class participant). As a casual drop-in class, Ballet for Seniors was open for any individual to commence dancing in any given class. Therefore, it was common to have new and less experienced people participating in the class.

Some class participants felt a sense of achievement when they were able to perform the movement sequences set by the teacher. For example, '[i]t just seemed a little bit stronger and harder and that today, and I just felt quite a few of them [the exercises], I did them. You know, I achieved it' (Susan, class participant, Action Cycle Three). As the class participants appeared to be competing with their ageing minds and bodies, rising to the challenges set by the teachers signified achievement.

The possibilities of under-challenge, over-challenge, and pleasurable challenge highlight the significance of the teacher's role in pitching the level of challenge offered during a ballet class. Under- and over-challenge could constitute situations where it is not possible to achieve a previously unaccomplished task and feel the pleasure of competitive play. What constitutes this pleasurable level of challenge, however, will likely differ

between class participants. Zurvas explained that '[s]ometimes you've got a group of people that know exactly what they're doing and they're waiting while you're teaching a couple of other people' (Teacher, Action Cycle One). Therefore, as a group-based activity, ballet classes present additional layers of complexity in how challenges are offered by the teacher and experienced by class participants.

## 10. Conclusion and Further Research

Our research demonstrated that the cognitive and physical challenges offered through the Ballet for Seniors class provided pleasure for the participants. The class participants expressed a clear desire to be challenged and to continue to cognitively and physically 'stretch' themselves through ballet. It appeared that testing oneself and competing against one's ageing mind and body was central to this pleasure. Furthermore, while overcoming challenges presented by ballet class may have been the goal, perhaps participation in 'implicit competition' (Kolb & Kalogeropoulou, 2012) was just as pleasurable for the class participants.

This article has provided an initial step towards understanding older adults' experiences in one ballet class. The findings support the importance of providing instruction that encourages ballet as a pleasurable challenging leisure activity. While this article has unpacked the experience of challenge in the Ballet for Seniors class, further research is required to identify and unpack the many types of pleasures that are experienced by recreational ballet dancers. These can further inform developments of safe and functional ballet pedagogy for older adults. Additionally, there is a need to critically consider how sub-groups of recreational ballet dancers – such as young adults, middle-aged adults, older adults, beginners, and experienced dancers – might experience different pleasures due to varying ballet experiences, life experiences, and reasons for dancing. This work would benefit from theoretical influences beyond dance, such as an analysis of recreational ballet classes as 'serious leisure'.

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