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Dancing to Wellness in the Studio:

Reflections on Adult Dance Practice and Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Adult dancers may begin dancing later in life or continue a lifelong practice from youth. Regardless of the motivations that inspire participation, engaging in dance classes offers multiple physical and mental health benefits that support wellness as we age. These benefits may be closely interconnected from both the dancer's and the teacher's perspectives. In this article, the authors, a maturing recreational ballet dancer and a dance pedagogue, use Donald Schön's (1991) reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action framework to explore their experiences of dancing while aging. Their reflections reveal a shared love of dance and show that for learners and teachers, social connections and acceptance of aging selves serve as gateways to safety and well-being in the studio. The sense of safety and well-being, in turn, manifests as feelings of belonging, self-worth, and profound joy. This suggests that encouraging maturing dancers and teachers to engage in structured critical reflection can support physical, cognitive, social, and emotional well-being as we age.

Reflection as a teaching and learning tool became a topic of discussion in dance education during the 1990s, accompanying a shift toward student-centered pedagogies (Risner 2017). Reflection is a precursor to and a driver of higher order cognitive development (Whalen and Paez 2021), and it fosters transformative learning (Brookfield 1991; Mezirow 1997; Le Pertel, Fisher, and van Dam 2020). Gaining meaningful insights from experience is enabled through teacher-facilitated scaffolding and the application of structured reflective frameworks (Coulson and Harvey 2013). A variety of frameworks and tools may be used to encourage reflection (Tembriotti and Tsangaridou 2014). Of these, Donald Schön's (1991) Reflective Practitioner model is well aligned to the practice-based, experiential nature of dance. Schön (1991) provided a means of accessing and articulating the tacit, embodied knowledge that

underpins dance practice across learning, teaching, and performance contexts.

Schön (1991) studied how professionals navigate complex, real-world situations and concluded that competent practitioners rely on technical knowledge, as well as intuition and critical reflection, to solve problems. Schön's model distinguishes between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action refers to the ability to think and adapt while engaged in a task. Reflection-on-action involves looking back after the event to analyze and learn from experience.

The following sections present reflective texts from Steph Clout, a maturing recreational ballet dancer, and Jennifer Nikolai, a maturing dancer and pedagogue. These reflections demonstrate how reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action unfold in adult dance practice and

teaching. Through these accounts, we explore how joy, social connection, and embodied awareness contribute to meaningful studio experiences, offering insights into the emotional and relational dimensions of dancing while aging. This sets the stage for a deeper discussion on the role of joy and social connection in fostering well-being and engagement in the adult dance classroom and studio.

AN ADULT RECREATIONAL DANCER REFLECTS ON EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING (STEPH CLOUT)

Reflective journaling is part of my daily routine and has become increasingly important for supporting my mental health and well-being as I age. The reflections that follow represent a typical day for me in the studio. I returned to ballet in 2016 after 35 years away from dance. At that time, ballet, with its focus on youthful athleticism and technical virtuosity, seemed very unwelcoming of adult learners who did not fit the traditional image of a dancer. This was reinforced by the stories I encountered in social media groups, news articles, and dance magazines. I was fortunate to find a school dedicated to teaching adults. Health, safety, and social and emotional well-being are prioritized over technical perfection. The physical and mental challenges I experienced as a returner were and still are very real. However, all this pales in comparison to the well-being that ballet brings to me and other maturing dancers.



Steph Clout waiting outside the exam room with classmates.

Reflection-in-Action

Women gather in the dance school lobby, waiting for class to begin. Some are giggling and chattering; others are warming up on the floor. I am relaxing on a couch, drinking coffee, and planning to become the next Misty Copeland. Suddenly, the sound of clapping and cheering erupts from the studio. We all turn and cast our eyes toward the closed door. The air is filled with electricity and nervous excitement. We wonder with anticipation what adventures await us today. The door opens, and a familiar voice calls us in. We fall silent and eagerly slip into the classroom. The short-lived silence is quickly broken by joy-filled exchanges between the teacher and adult learners and laughter as everyone takes their place at the barre. The music begins, and we assume elegant ballet postures. My back lengthens, legs turn out, abdominals engage, arms become round, breathing slows, facial expression softens, and eyes fix on an imaginary horizon. A calm and contemplative mood settles across the studio.

Creaking knees, popping joints, occasional groans, and embarrassed laughter break the meditative atmosphere as maturing bodies plié in the second position. My Achilles twitches in protest, and my physiotherapist's face emerges from my subconscious. He shakes his head and reminds me that I am injured (again). "You are in your mid-fifties and obese. Be careful," he says sternly. His face fades, I lose focus, and my posture slumps. Frustrated, I let out a loud guttural sigh as the realities of being a maturing woman hit home again. Instantly, I regret my decision to slouch on the school couch and spend my evenings with family instead of attending conditioning classes. As I sink into self-pity, the teacher smiles and gives me a knowing nod of encouragement. I sense she has heard that sigh a hundred times before. I pull myself out of my funk and glance around the studio at my classmates and the teacher. Our ages, appearances, personalities, and physical abilities are all different. None of us are cookie-cutter images of each other or the idealized, youthful ballerina. Yet, we are all ballet dancers, beautiful and graceful in our own right. By the end of the barre section, I am reenergized, joyful, and grinning from ear to ear again. Ballet days are the best days.

Reflection-on-Action

As I reflect on today's class, the faces of my adult ballet teachers appear before me with twinkling eyes and broad smiles. I hear their voices encouraging me to be brave. They are asking me to accept myself, trust them, step out of my comfort zone, and share their belief that I can achieve anything I set my mind to. My teachers call me to take ownership of my decisions and actions. There is no place for self-pity in their classrooms. Most of all, they remind me that, like all dancers, I am a creature of infinite possibilities, and my future is a mystery waiting to unfold. I reflect on my journey as an adult dancer and feel gratitude, hope, pleasure, and joy. These positive emotions motivate my continued participation in adult ballet and are central to my optimal well-being.

Joy Is Linked to Positive Emotional Well-Being in the Dance Studio

Joy is a complex and subjective emotion that authors have found difficult to define (Roberts and Appiah 2025). For me, joy arises from the energy and pleasure I feel while moving to music, and from being immersed in a community that shares my love of dance. The effects of joy extend well beyond the studio—I feel physically stronger, mentally clearer, deeply connected to others, more resilient, and better prepared to embrace the changes that come with aging. My personal experiences align with emerging research on the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of joy in recreational dance.

The voices of maturing recreational dancers in the literature reveal that joy is often at the heart of emotional well-being in and out of the studio (Conrad 2021; Clout 2024). Experiencing joy promotes cognitive and behavioral changes that facilitate skill acquisition, creativity, and social connectedness (Johnson 2020). Joy through dance is reported to be closely associated with the pleasure derived from social relationships (Alfredsson Olsson and Heikkinen 2019; Markula et al. 2022; Beselt et al. 2023; Ferm Almqvist and Andersson 2023; Clout 2024), the enjoyment of moving to music (Ferm Almqvist 2020; Chipperfield and Bissell 2023; Paglione et al. 2024), and the satisfaction of mastering challenging technique and choreography (Ali-Haapala, Moyle, and Kerr 2020). For some adults, the joy of dance infuses their everyday lives with a sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose (Ferm Almqvist 2021; Ferm Almqvist, Björkman, and Lundberg-Bouquelson 2023; Clout 2024). A firm self-concept and community connections might help build psychological resilience (Lanke and Nath 2024) and counteract the adverse effects social isolation and systemic ageism have on health and well-being (Wright-St Clair et al. 2017; Lyons et al. 2018; Paoletti 2024).

Dance Teachers Are the Catalysts for Student Emotional Well-Being

My classmates and I seek teachers who take us seriously (Ferm Almqvist 2021) and willingly share their joy, excitement, and passion for dance. In these classrooms, ballet instruction is interwoven with self-discovery (Graham 2023) and a sense of freedom (Ferm Almqvist and Andersson 2019). Docherty et al. (2026) found that teachers who adopted joy-centered pedagogies “flourished when teaching adult ballet” (10). This suggests that placing emotional well-being at the heart of dance is beneficial for both learners and teachers.

AN ADULT DANCE PEDAGOGUE REFLECTS (JENNIFER NIKOLAI)

I identify as a maturing dancer and dance pedagogue, having taught contemporary dance in the university sector and

adult dance in the community for many years. I began ballet training as a child and have continued to dance in classes and performance settings as an adult. As an older adult, I draw on a rich history of ballet and contemporary dance. These forms increasingly shape how I move with intention and care each day, guided by a deep sense of dance self-awareness. I now teach in collaboration with peers, guided by adaptive dance pedagogy and teaching strategies that support us as adult dancers and as individuals navigating daily movement with adaptability, awareness, and care.

In the realm of teaching and rehearsing dance improvisation and recalling choreography for performance, I repeatedly turn to structured improvisation. I prefer approaches that allow me to adapt my movement vocabulary within a sequence, in the moment, and in a way that supports sustainability as I age. Each class I teach or rehearsal I attend is adaptive, shaped by the range of injuries I have historically managed. Retaining a degree of challenge, I discover new ways to move and find inspiration in my peers and our shared desire to move safely, with care, and in ways that adapt.

When my daily work becomes more sedentary, I find that I need extra time to gently transition back into movement. Spending more time as a dance pedagogue than as a dance student, my memory for class material and reliance on repetition are less practiced than in previous decades. I have arrived at a comfortable self-awareness: I prefer structured improvisation as an approach to dancing in class and performing with fellow older adults, because precise movement vocabulary is less frequently practiced, and conceptual principles tend to endure more than specific sequences (Nikolai and Markula 2021). When dancing, I recall and repeat an overall structure or conceptual intention, but I don’t aim to perform movements in unison, land on the same phrase, or use the same body part in the same way from one phrase or day to the next.



Jennifer Nikolai improvising in preparation for upcoming performance.

Reflection-in-Action

Reflecting as a student taking classes with a dance teacher, I align with what Weidmann (2018) suggested. As a student engaging in reflective pedagogy, I find it impossible to separate my experience of learning as a dancer from my critical perspective as a dance teacher. In class, I remain present and engaged. I am drawn to the technical repetition of ballet—the attention to specificity and articulation in both fine and gross motor skills, the development of strength and flexibility, and the sense of nostalgia that ballet barre and music evoke for me. The calming familiarity of barre sequences supports my ability to dance safely and with technical precision during center practice. From there, I transition into open improvisation, guided by the structure and rhythm established earlier in the class.

The reflective pedagogy I most profoundly prefer is that of the dancer and dance pedagogue coming together in a joyful reunion. I dance without expectation of outcomes. Freedom! I revel in the pure love of dance, supported by a low-risk environment that allows me to move safely and freely. I return to memories of my favorite footwork, my love of a grand plié executed with care, and allegro that still lifts me to heights I no longer experience elsewhere. These opportunities to revisit motor memories remind me of what I love most about dance.

Reflection-on-Action

I reflect on the reciprocity between peers by asking, from my teacher self, what my adult dance students are seeking as dancers. Yes, we crave a community where we can joyfully dance to music together, building strength, flexibility, and mobility as we age. As a pedagogue, I intentionally apply a caring pedagogy in the studio (Docherty et al. 2026). This approach prioritizes learners' well-being by intentionally fostering environments where learners feel seen, respected, supported, and motivated to thrive (Pink 2025). Together we experience fun, mutual joy, and care as we dance. I notice that we become aware of how we are moving—in the present moment, at this age, and on this day. The element of peer fun, underpinned by caring pedagogy, highlights the significance of an adult dance teacher intentionally applying compassionate teaching practices in partnership with fellow dancers (Warburton 2004).

Dance Students Are the Catalysts for Teacher Emotional Well-Being

Student-centered classrooms and studio environments position students as the primary influence on a teacher's pedagogical choices. In dance education for older adults, the literature highlights the importance of empathy and sensitivity from the pedagogue, as well as the adaptability required to respond to moment-to-moment variations. These variations are guided by a supportive teacher but ultimately enacted by responsive dance students.

Traditionally, I may have been taught ballet through a conventional teacher-to-student ethos—a distinctly directive approach focused on performance outcomes. However, when my peers and I apply strategies like mirroring or lead-follow, I observe that safety, joy, care, and even humor take precedence, often softening any critical interrogation we might have of our current directive methods. In a student-centered class, diverse learning approaches are considered in both the content and creative objectives, always beginning with this question: What suits us? As a dance student, my ongoing commitment to student-centered pedagogy gently reveals the reciprocity at play—where the student becomes the teacher, and the teacher becomes the student. I find that I cannot, and do not wish to, separate one role from the other.

I think of the studio and performance contexts as *dancerly spaces of significance*. These are settings where individuals routinely immerse themselves in meaningful social interactions and form emotional connections. Such spaces play an essential role in supporting social health and well-being, particularly as we age. Thulin and Vilhelmson (2025) described these experiences as *togetherness*, or being with others in shared spaces, times, and activities. This concept captures the diverse ways older adults socialize and engage with others in their everyday life settings. For me, togetherness includes attending dance performances with fellow dancers—stepping outside our daily routines to connect with like-minded adults. It might not resemble the nostalgic memories of arriving early to class in leotards and pointe shoes, but it carries the same resonance: preparing together with shared inspiration and creative intention (Thulin and Vilhelmson 2025). As we age, these adaptations reflect a collective care for self and others, affirming the simple act of showing up—to be present and dance, regardless of injuries, fatigue, or competing demands on our time.

Regarding injuries that interrupt our ability to dance, Griffin (2017) referred to embodied learning—a concept especially relevant to midlife adults who are reengaging with physical activity as a way to age well. As authors who identify as adult dancers and dance teachers, we often experience pauses that require us to begin again, adapting our practice after injury or other interruptions. In these moments of return and reflection, we engage in reciprocal learning and teaching, relying on embodied knowledge to guide us. This return to adapted dance is often deeply focused and absorbing (Griffin 2017), as if we are entering a new cycle—one where dancing remains at our core.

CONCLUSION

Through reflective practice grounded in Schön's (1991) framework, this article explored how emotional well-being in the adult dance studio is shaped by joy, reciprocity, and adaptive pedagogies. Both the dancer and teacher perspectives reveal that social connection, embodied awareness, and acceptance of aging selves are central to creating dancerly

spaces of significance. These reflections affirm that student-centered, compassionate teaching and learning environments not only support physical and cognitive development, but also foster a profound sense of belonging, purpose, and joy. By engaging in critical reflection on practice, we can deepen our relationship with dance and open pathways to joy through awareness, adaptation, and connection. In this way, dance becomes not only a practice of movement, but a practice of well-being as we age.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. ✈

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