The Poetics of Embodied Intelligence: Creative Dance as an Educational Commons for Inclusion and Community Leadership

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The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This workshop explores creative and community dance as a form of embodied intelligence, functioning as a shared resource that fosters inclusion, collaboration, and community leadership in education. In an era dominated by standardized, technology-mediated learning, embodied practices reclaim the body as a site of knowledge, agency, and relational understanding. Drawing on research in community dance, participatory pedagogy, and inclusive education, participants will engage in movement-based strategies that cultivate empathy, cooperation, and collective problem-solving. Through structured improvisation and reflective movement tasks, participants will experience how shared movement practices strengthen collective cohesion, mutual recognition, and participatory leadership. Each activity is paired with pedagogical rationale, illustrating how creative dance nurtures agency, leadership, inclusion, and intercultural understanding. By framing dance as an educational commons, participants will explore how redistributing agency through embodied practice promotes equitable participation and cultivates learning environments grounded in care, creativity, and collaboration. These principles extend beyond classrooms, modeling values of cooperation, shared responsibility, and global citizenship. Designed for educators, researchers, activists, education policymakers, and arts practitioners, this workshop equips participants with practical methodologies, reflective prompts, and adaptable exercises suitable for diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: embodied intelligence, community dance, educational commons, inclusion

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Introduction

Contemporary societies are increasingly shaped by forms of knowledge production that privilege cognitive, individualised, and technology-mediated modes of learning. While digital acceleration has undoubtedly broadened access to information, it has simultaneously left us feeling disconnected, raising urgent questions about where human presence, sensory experience, relational intimacy, and collective meaning-making belong in modern educational and community spaces (Biesta, 2022). Biesta (2022) argues that education must enable individuals to exist meaningfully with and in the world, rather than acting as isolated cognitive consumers.

We learn not just with our minds, but through our skin, our breath, and our shared rhythm. In response to this hyper-cognitive drift, scholars and practitioners across the arts, humanities, and social sciences are returning to embodiment, not merely as a trend, but as a crucial counterweight to purely intellectualised frameworks of understanding (Shapiro & Stolz, 2019; Varela, et al., 1991). In response, scholars have renewed interest in embodiment as a way of understanding learning, by moving from passive observation to deeply integrated corporeal action. Similarly, there is shift of viewing embodied learning as a way of participation, and social engagement beyond purely cognitive frameworks.

Creative and community dance offers a powerful context through which embodied intelligence can be experienced as a relational and participatory process. It is the living, physical capacity of the human body to process information, adapt to forces, generate creative solutions, and communicate without relying exclusively on verbal or abstract thought. In dance, the body is not just an instrument carried around by the mind; the body itself is the thinking subject (Beardall, 2017).

Moreover, rather than treating movement solely as artistic expression or physical activity, community dance positions the body as a site of inquiry, communication, and collective knowledge production. Through shared movement practices, participants negotiate meaning, cultivate empathy, develop mutual awareness, and co-create experiences that challenge hierarchical models of participation and leadership. In this sense, dance becomes not only an artistic practice but also a social and pedagogical process through which communities are continuously formed and transformed.

This paper proposes the concept of creative dance as an educational common (Anttila, 2015; Bollier & Helfrich, 2019), a vibrant shared space where movement acts as a public resource that nurtures equitable access, distributed agency, and organic community leadership. Drawing on perspectives from embodied cognition, community dance, participatory pedagogy, and theories of the commons, the paper argues that embodied practices create conditions in which knowledge, responsibility, and creativity are collectively generated rather than individually owned. Leadership is understood not as the authority of a single individual but as an emergent, relational process arising through shared participation and collaborative decision-making. Therefore, leadership emerges relationally, it flows dynamically from participant to participant through mutual trust, improvised responses, and collaborative decision-making (Raelin, 2016).

The paper presents and reflects upon an interactive workshop delivered at the European Conference on Arts & Humanities (ECAH2026). The workshop invited participants to engage in a sequence of experiential movement practices designed to cultivate embodied awareness, shared agency, collaborative meaning-making, and community leadership. Rather than

evaluating participant outcomes, the paper uses the workshop as a practice-based case to examine how creative dance can enact the principles of educational commons through embodied participation (Leavy, 2020). In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions on the role of embodied artistic practices in fostering inclusive, democratic, and participatory forms of learning and community engagement.

Embodied Intelligence in Dance Practice

Embodied intelligence in dance refers to the capacity of the body to perceive, interpret, and act through movement, environmental interaction, and relational dynamics. Distinct from abstract or purely cognitive reasoning, embodied intelligence emerges directly through sensory awareness, kinesthetic perception, and bodily action (Yang et al., 2024). Within dance practice, this intelligence operates across multiple interconnected dimensions. Dancers cultivate interoceptive and somatic sensing through a heightened awareness of internal signals, such as breath, muscular tension, and alignment, allowing them to regulate movement quality, adapt physical effort, and communicate affective states (Savrami, 2017). Simultaneously, kinesthetic and spatial intelligence enables dancers to negotiate physical forces like gravity, weight, momentum, and spatial boundaries through continuous sensory feedback rather than explicit calculation (Clark, 2016).

Beyond individual physical execution, embodied intelligence encompasses relational attunement and kinesthetic empathy, particularly within collaborative practices such as contact improvisation and community dance. In these settings, movement becomes a shared communicative field where participants intuitively respond to changes in weight, rhythm, and intention without relying on verbal interaction (Foster, 2011). Furthermore, dancers engage in embodied metacognition by evaluating and refining their movement processes while in motion, seamlessly integrating bodily sensation with aesthetic and creative decision-making (Eddy, 2016).

When translated into educational, community, and eco-somatic contexts, embodied intelligence shifts from an individual physical skill to a relational and socially situated capacity. By framing somatic inquiry as a legitimate form of knowledge production, these practices challenge hyper-cognitive and hierarchical learning frameworks. Emerging research highlights how socially engaged somatic practices position the body as a site of critical reflection, collective transformation, and liberatory pedagogy, fostering inclusive, participatory spaces through shared physical presence (Beardall, 2017).

Creative and Community Dance

Creative and community dance practices shift the emphasis from performance as the presentation of a predetermined artistic product towards participation as a meaningful embodied process (Hanna, 2015). Although performance may sometimes form part of a community dance project, its value is not necessarily located in technical excellence or competitive achievement, but in the experiences of connection, expression, creativity, and belonging that develop through participation. Snook et al. (2026), in their meta-analysis of 24 community dance projects, identify participation, inclusion, collaborative relationships, and a focus on participants as central values of community dance, emphasising that there is no presumption of technical skill or requirement to be a “good” dancer. Their findings further suggest that the process and the journey are as important as the final outcome, with social engagement, collaboration, connection, and the valuing of others emerging across all the

projects examined. In this sense, dance becomes an opportunity to create a safe and supportive space in which diverse bodies and experiences are recognised as significant, enabling participants to experience themselves not simply as performers, but as active members of a shared community. In this context, dance can function as an inclusive space in which different bodies, abilities, identities, and forms of expression are valued, challenging conventional distinctions between dancer and non-dancer, expert and participant, performer and audience. From this perspective, dance is understood not merely as physical activity or bodily development, but as an artistic, aesthetic, cultural, anthropological, pedagogical, and educational medium (Klein et al., 2019).

Co-creation is central to this participatory orientation, as creative and community dance practices position participants as active contributors to the generation of movement, meaning, and artistic knowledge. Rather than receiving movement material passively from a choreographer or teacher, participants are invited to bring their own experiences, ideas, cultural identities, imagination, and embodied knowledge into the creative process. Snook et al. (2026) describe this through a humanising and participant-centred pedagogy in which dance is developed *with* participants rather than simply *for* them, highlighting the importance of listening to participants' voices and enabling them to contribute to decisions. Similarly, Markus and Fergerson's (2026) engagement with bell hooks foregrounds imagination, counternarrative, love, and community as pedagogical practices that nurture collaboration and agency. Their examples demonstrate how student-generated movement, collective composition, reflection, and opportunities for participants to lead can transform the dance classroom into a space of shared authorship. Co-creation, therefore, is not simply a technique for producing choreography; it is a relational process through which participants develop ownership, agency, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging. These processes can also challenge hierarchical structures traditionally associated with dance-making and education.

In that perspective, it consequently challenges the hierarchical relationships traditionally embedded within dance education and artistic production. A non-hierarchical process does not necessarily imply the absence of leadership or expertise; rather, it involves a redistribution of agency in which the facilitator becomes responsible for creating the conditions for participation, dialogue, experimentation, and shared decision-making. Snook et al. (2026) connect this orientation with inclusive, humanising, and culturally responsive pedagogies, arguing for practices that value every participant and attend to their individual needs, identities, abilities, and contexts. This resonates with bell hooks's emphasis, as interpreted by Markus and Fergerson (2026), on care, respect, trust, commitment, honest communication, and community as foundations for transformative educational relationships. Within such a framework, authority becomes relational rather than simply imposed: facilitators guide, support, and hold the space, while participants contribute knowledge, movement, perspectives, and leadership. Creative and community dance can therefore be understood as a form of embodied democratic practice, where the removal of excessive emphasis on competition, technical perfection, and predetermined outcomes allows space for reciprocity, collective agency, and diverse ways of knowing.

Educational Commons and Distributed Leadership

Within the fields of culture and education, the concept of the commons can be applied to creative dance, which can be understood as both a cultural and pedagogical commons. Creative forms of dance function as collective practices of expression, learning, and meaning-making through embodied experience, grounded in participation, collaboration, and co-creation. Dance

practices are not treated as commodified products or as the exclusive privilege of experts, but as shared cultural resources that are produced and reproduced through the active engagement of participants. In this context, creative dance groups constitute communities of practice that foster participatory cultures, equitable contribution, the acceptance of diversity, and self-organisation beyond rigid hierarchies (Klein et al., 2019). Embodied knowledge, movement expression, and dance creation are shared and collectively developed, supporting experiential learning and social cohesion.

This understanding of creative dance as a cultural and pedagogical commons is further supported by empirical research demonstrating its capacity to strengthen social relationships and collaborative networks. Zander et al. (2014), for example, found that sustained participation in group dance activities within school settings strengthened both emotional bonds and collaborative relationships among students, expanded their social networks, and increased reciprocal cooperation, thereby fostering a stronger sense of belonging and collective participation, particularly among students who traditionally displayed lower levels of engagement. Similarly, Kreutzmann et al. (2018), in a longitudinal study of 606 students across 30 classrooms, found that long-term participation in a school-based dance intervention was associated with a stronger sense of belonging, mediated by increased acceptance of and by peers. Students participating in the dance programme developed more extensive and reciprocal social networks than those in the control group, suggesting that dance can operate as a collective practice that enhances participation, connectivity, and social cohesion within the school community.

Further theoretical perspectives on dance education reinforce this understanding of creative dance as an educational commons by emphasising dance as a site of social learning and collective coexistence (Erdal & Strømsø, 2018; Freire, 1970). From this perspective, dance extends beyond the individual execution of movements to create dialogical or "third spaces" in which participants learn and coexist through the recognition and expression of difference. Anttila (2015) argue that such an approach positions dance education not merely as a means of developing movement skills, but as a platform for building relationships, expressing identity, and engaging with diversity within democratic and multicultural environments. Movement-based learning can enhance the effectiveness of educational processes and support the acquisition of broader cognitive competencies. These include the development of perception, memory, language, concentration, self-discipline, readiness, decision-making and problem-solving skills, empathy, and awareness of the social role of art (Anttila, 2015).

Within education, dance and bodily expression can also encourage learners to become active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Such approaches stimulate critical and creative thinking and enrich processes of inquiry, analysis, interpretation, and understanding. In this sense, artistic practices can open up new interdisciplinary possibilities for learning and create educational environments in which knowledge is explored through embodied, creative, and collaborative experiences (Antilla, 2015; Murphy, 2014). Its value lies precisely in the collective processes through which movement is explored, negotiated, shared, and transformed, enabling learners to become active agents in the construction of their social and educational environments. The body becomes both a medium through which meanings are expressed and communicated and a source of knowledge and understanding. By developing awareness of the body and its meanings, learners can cultivate new ways of perceiving themselves, others, and the world around them (Klein et al., 2019). Creative dance thus contributes to the development of active, critically engaged, and socially empowered individuals while supporting the

formation of inclusive learning communities grounded in participation, reciprocity, belonging, and democratic engagement.

In creative and community dance, leadership can be understood as relational rather than hierarchical, emerging through interactions between facilitators, artists, and participants rather than being located exclusively in the authority of the choreographer or teacher. The facilitator's role is not to impose a predetermined artistic outcome but to create the conditions in which participants can contribute, make decisions, share knowledge, and influence the direction of the creative process (Raelin, 2016). Leadership is therefore distributed across the group and continually negotiated through listening, dialogue, responsiveness, and trust. This approach recognises that participants bring valuable embodied, cultural, and experiential knowledge to the process, while the facilitator contributes expertise in creating a safe and supportive environment for collective exploration. As discussed by Markus and Fergerson (2026), pedagogical relationships can be transformed when respect and honest communication become foundational principles of the learning environment. Their examples of creative dance practice demonstrate how leadership can be shared, for instance when students contribute movement ideas, collectively develop choreography, and subsequently take on leadership roles within the group. Similarly, community dance research emphasises participant voice and agency, positioning the facilitator as someone who supports rather than controls the creative process. Leadership as relational therefore involves cultivating the capacity of the group to lead collectively. Creative and community dance can thus become a space where leadership is experienced as a reciprocal and embodied practice rather than through fixed hierarchies.

Methodology

This paper adopts a practice-based research approach, positioning creative practice as a mode of inquiry and knowledge production (Pakes, 2003). In practice-based research, embodied and artistic processes are not merely objects of investigation but also methodological tools through which knowledge is generated (Barrett, 2007; Nelson, 2023). The workshop presented in this paper was designed as an exploratory embodied inquiry into the relationship between creative dance, educational commons, and participatory forms of leadership. The methodology was informed by principles of community dance, experiential learning, and arts-based research. The workshop was structured as a sequence of movement experiences progressing from individual embodied awareness towards relational interaction and collective meaning-making.

The paper does not seek to measure participant outcomes; rather, it critically reflects on the pedagogical design of the workshop and examines how embodied practices can enact the principles of educational commons.

Table 1
Workshop Design and Implementation

Aim	Practice	Theoretical connection
Developing bodily awareness	Embodiment through improvisation	Embodied intelligence
Listening and responding	Relational improvisation	Shared agency
Negotiating ideas and decisions	Collective composition	Community leadership
Collective meaning - making	Reflection	Educational commons

The first workshop activity focused on developing *bodily awareness* as an entry point into *embodied intelligence*. Participants were invited to engage in an improvisational movement exploration that encouraged them to attend to internal bodily sensations, including breathing, weight, balance, muscular tension, and the initiation of movement. Rather than following predetermined choreographic sequences, participants were encouraged to allow movement to emerge through sensory attention and moment-to-moment bodily responses. This improvisational approach positioned the body not simply as an instrument for executing movement but as a source of perception, knowledge, and decision-making. By directing attention towards the relationship between sensation, intention, and action, the exercise introduced participants to embodied intelligence as a form of situated knowing that develops through active engagement with the body and its environment. The activity also established the experiential foundation for the subsequent workshop practices, moving from individual bodily awareness towards relational attunement, shared agency, and collective forms of participation.

The second activity focused on *listening and responding* through relational improvisation, exploring how embodied intelligence can extend beyond individual bodily awareness towards an attunement to others and *shared agency*. Participants engaged in paired movement explorations in which they were invited to observe, sense, and respond to subtle changes in their partner's movement, rhythm, direction, and use of space. Through processes of following, initiating, and adapting, participants experienced movement as a form of non-verbal dialogue in which agency was continuously negotiated between individuals. The exercise intentionally disrupted fixed distinctions between leader and follower, encouraging participants to shift between initiating and responding and to recognise that each person's movement could influence the direction of the shared process. In this way, relational improvisation created opportunities for participants to experience shared agency as a dynamic and embodied process. Rather than locating decision-making in a single individual, the activity demonstrated how collective action can emerge through attentive listening, mutual responsiveness, and the willingness to adapt one's own actions in relation to others.

The third activity focused on *negotiating ideas and decisions* through *collective composition*, exploring the relationship between embodied creativity and *community leadership*. Participants were presented with a painting and first engaged in a collective process of observation and interpretation, examining its visual elements, symbols, and possible social meanings. Drawing on the themes that emerged from this analysis, each group identified a contemporary social issue that resonated with the painting and collaboratively developed a short choreographic composition, based purely on dynamics and qualities of movement, to express its relevance to present-day society. The process required participants to negotiate different interpretations, select and combine ideas, make collective decisions, and determine how an abstract social concern could be communicated through movement. Leadership was therefore not assigned to a particular individual but emerged through the collaborative process, as participants alternated between proposing, listening, adapting, supporting, and guiding the group's creative direction. The activity demonstrated community leadership as a fluid and relational process in which individuals contribute to a shared purpose while remaining responsive to the ideas and perspectives of others. Through collective composition, participants experienced how creative decision-making can become a form of shared responsibility and how artistic practice can provide a space for communities to critically engage with contemporary social issues.

The final workshop activity focused on *collective meaning-making* through *reflection*, inviting participants to consider and articulate the knowledge generated through their embodied and collaborative experiences by connecting it to the concept of the *educational commons.*

Following the movement explorations and collective composition, participants reflected on the processes they had experienced and discussed how the activities had shaped their understanding of participation, inclusion, agency, collaboration, and leadership. Rather than treating reflection as an individual assessment of the workshop, the process was structured as a collective dialogue in which participants shared different perspectives and connected their embodied experiences to broader educational and social contexts. This process of collectively interpreting experience reinforced the concept of the educational commons, understood here as a relational space in which knowledge is not simply transmitted from an expert to passive recipients but is collectively produced, negotiated, and shared. The reflective process therefore extended the principles explored through movement into dialogue, highlighting how embodied practice can generate shared knowledge and create conditions for mutual recognition, collective responsibility, and collaborative learning. In this sense, the workshop concluded by bringing together embodied intelligence, shared agency, and community leadership within a common process of meaning-making, illustrating how creative dance can function as an educational commons through which participants collectively contribute to and shape the knowledge being produced.

Discussion and Conclusion

The workshop was designed as a progressive embodied inquiry through which participants moved from individual bodily awareness towards relational interaction, collective decision-making, and shared meaning-making. This progression reflects an understanding of embodied intelligence not as an individual capacity that resides within the body, but as a relational and situated form of knowing that develops through interaction with others and with the surrounding environment (Shapiro & Stolz, 2019). The four activities therefore functioned as interconnected stages rather than as discrete exercises, progressively expanding the focus from the individual body to the relational and collective dimensions of creative practice.

The first activity established embodied awareness as the foundation of the workshop, inviting participants to attend to bodily sensations and to experience movement as a source of perception and knowledge (Savrami, 2017; Yang et al., 2024). The second activity extended this awareness into relational space, demonstrating how listening and responding through movement can redistribute agency between participants. Through relational improvisation, the distinction between leader and follower became fluid, allowing participants to experience shared agency as an ongoing process of initiating, responding, adapting, and supporting one another (Kreutzmann et al., 2018). The third activity further expanded this process into collective decision-making. By interpreting a painting, identifying contemporary social concerns, and transforming these ideas into a collective choreographic composition, participants engaged in negotiation, collaboration, and shared responsibility (Markus & Fergerson, 2026). Leadership consequently emerged not as a fixed position but as a fluid and relational practice. Finally, the reflective process enabled participants to collectively interpret the knowledge generated through their embodied experiences, connecting individual and group processes to broader social and educational questions (Pakes, 2003).

Taken together, the workshop suggests a conceptual relationship between embodied intelligence, shared agency, community leadership, and educational commons. Embodied intelligence provided the starting point for developing awareness and responsiveness; shared agency emerged as participants influenced and shaped one another's actions; and community leadership developed through processes of collective negotiation and decision-making. These processes culminated in collective meaning-making, through which knowledge was produced

and shared within the group. Participants were invited not only to perform movement but to influence the direction of the collective process (Klein et al., 2019; Raelin, 2016). From this perspective, the educational commons can be understood not simply as a shared resource or physical space but as a relational process in which participants collectively contribute to, shape, and transform knowledge. Creative dance thus becomes a means through which the principles of the commons can be embodied and enacted rather than merely discussed.

Acknowledgments

The research is conducted in the operating framework of the University of Thessaly Innovation, Technology Transfer Unit and Entrepreneurship Center "One Planet Thessaly", under the "University of Thessaly Grants for Scientific Publication Support" action and is funded by the Special Account of Research Grants of the University of Thessaly.

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