

The Pedagogy of the Moving Body: Dance, Curriculum and Knowledge Production in Indian Education

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Abstract

Education is often understood through activities that are easily visible and measurable: reading, writing, speaking, listening, answering questions and completing examinations. Within this familiar structure, the body frequently remains in the background. Yet learning is never entirely detached from the body. We sit, observe, imitate, repeat, remember, experience, perform and respond through our bodies. Dance makes this dimension of learning particularly visible. A dancer does not acquire knowledge only by reading about movement or listening to an explanation; knowledge gradually becomes part of the body through observation, practice, correction, repetition, sensation, memory and performance. Dance, therefore, provides an important lens through which the relationship between pedagogy, curriculum and knowledge can be reconsidered.

This article examines dance as an embodied pedagogical practice within the Indian educational context. It argues that dance should not be understood merely as an artistic skill or extracurricular activity but as a mode of knowing through which physical, intellectual, emotional, aesthetic and cultural forms of understanding are developed together. The discussion considers traditional Indian modes of transmission, particularly the teacher–student relationship, alongside contemporary institutional education. It also examines the changing position of dance within the National Education Policy 2020, the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage 2022 and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023. Particular attention is given to the concepts of embodied knowledge, tacit knowledge, practice, reflection and cultural memory. The article proposes that recognising the moving body as a legitimate site of knowledge production can contribute to a more inclusive and experiential understanding of curriculum in Indian education. Rather than suggesting that dance should replace textual or theoretical learning, the study proposes a dialogue between body, mind, text and practice.

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Introduction: When the Body Enters the Classroom

A familiar picture of education begins with a classroom. Students sit at desks, books are opened, a teacher explains a subject, and learners listen, take notes, and eventually reproduce what they have understood in an examination. This model has its own importance and has enabled generations of students to develop literacy, analytical ability and disciplinary knowledge. Yet it also raises a simple question: what kinds of knowledge become less visible when education is organised primarily around reading, writing and verbal explanation? The question becomes particularly interesting when we consider dance. A student learning Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, Manipuri, Kuchipudi, Mohiniyattam, Sattriya or another Indian dance tradition does not learn exclusively from books. A written description of a posture cannot entirely communicate what it feels like to hold that posture. A verbal explanation of rhythm cannot substitute for experiencing laya through the body. A description of abhinaya cannot completely convey how an emotion gradually becomes visible through the face, eyes, hands, torso and movement. The student has to watch, attempt, fail, correct, repeat and experience. This does not mean that dance is anti-intellectual. Quite the opposite is true. Dance requires memory, interpretation, concentration, rhythmic intelligence, spatial awareness, aesthetic judgment and sustained reflection. The intellectual and physical dimensions of learning are continuously intertwined. This understanding is particularly relevant in contemporary Indian education. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises experiential, holistic and multidisciplinary learning and seeks to reduce rigid separations between curricular areas. The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022 includes children's exploration of their voice, body, space, rhythm, music, dance and movement within learning outcomes. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 goes further by placing “Music, Dance and Movement” within the progression of arts learning across school stages. These developments suggest a significant shift. Dance is no longer easily described only as an activity that takes place after the “real” academic work has been completed. It can be understood as part of the process through which learners encounter, interpret and produce knowledge.

The present article explores this possibility. It asks what happens when the body is not treated merely as an instrument that carries out instructions but as a site of knowing. It considers how Indian dance traditions can illuminate questions of pedagogy, curriculum and knowledge production and how these insights might contribute to contemporary educational thinking.

Rethinking What Counts as Knowledge

The question of knowledge is at the centre of education. Schools and universities decide, explicitly or implicitly, what is worth knowing, how knowledge should be transmitted and how learning should be demonstrated. Written examinations, essays, oral presentations and standardised assessments have traditionally provided dominant ways of demonstrating knowledge. These forms are valuable, but they do not exhaust the possibilities of knowing.

Michael Polanyi's distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge is useful here. His proposition that people can “know more than they can tell” draws attention to forms of understanding that cannot always be completely expressed through language. A dancer's knowledge provides a clear example. A highly trained performer may be able to explain a movement, but the explanation is not identical to the knowledge acquired through years of bodily practice.

Embodied approaches to cognition similarly challenge a strict separation between mind and body. Varela, Thompson and Rosch's *The Embodied Mind* argues for understanding cognition through lived experience and embodied action rather than treating the mind as an isolated information-processing system. Within dance, this perspective becomes especially meaningful because thinking takes place through movement. Consider the learning of rhythm. A student may initially count beats verbally: one, two, three, four. With practice, however, rhythm begins to be experienced differently. The learner anticipates the beat, recognises a variation, senses a pause and responds to the musical structure almost before consciously verbalising it. Knowledge has moved from explanation towards embodied understanding. The same process can be observed in posture and alignment. At the beginning, a teacher may repeatedly instruct the student to adjust the shoulders, knees, spine or gaze. Gradually, the student begins to sense the correction independently. The teacher's external instruction becomes internal bodily awareness. This movement from instruction to awareness is pedagogically significant. It demonstrates that education is not always a matter of transferring information from one person to another. Sometimes education involves creating the conditions through which learners develop the ability to sense, interpret and act for themselves. Dance therefore brings an important question into curriculum discourse: if knowledge can be embodied, should the curriculum recognise embodied knowing alongside textual, verbal and numerical forms of knowing?

The Indian Dance Tradition as a Pedagogical Knowledge System

Indian dance traditions offer a particularly rich field for exploring this question because their pedagogies have historically involved close relationships between teacher, learner, practice and performance. The traditional teacher–student relationship cannot be reduced to a simple classroom model. Learning often takes place through observation and repeated practice. The teacher demonstrates, the student imitates, the teacher corrects, and the student gradually develops control and understanding. This process may continue for years. Such learning is not restricted to physical technique. Through dance, students encounter literature, mythology, music, rhythm, aesthetics, gesture, philosophy, regional history and cultural memory. A single composition can require the learner to negotiate text, music, movement and emotion simultaneously. The significance of this tradition lies not in idealising the past. Traditional pedagogies have their own limitations, hierarchies and exclusions, and they should not be treated as automatically superior to contemporary education. The important point is that they demonstrate a different understanding of how knowledge can be transmitted. In a dance class, “showing” may be as important as “telling”. A teacher's body becomes a pedagogical resource. The student's body becomes a site of experimentation. Correction is not necessarily an interruption of learning; it is part of learning itself. The process can be represented as:

Observation → Imitation → Repetition → Correction → Embodiment → Interpretation → Performance → Reflection → Knowledge Production

This sequence is not necessarily linear. A dancer may return repeatedly to observation after performing, reinterpret a movement after reflection or discover a new understanding through repeated practice. Nevertheless, the model demonstrates an important principle: practice itself can be a form of inquiry.

From Gurukul to Institution: Changing Conditions of Transmission

One of the most important transformations in Indian dance education has been the movement from intimate systems of transmission towards institutional education. Traditional learning could involve long periods of apprenticeship and close contact between teacher and student. Modern institutions, by contrast, generally work through defined courses, semesters, curricula, timetables, examinations and academic qualifications. Dance education within universities therefore operates within a different structure from traditional apprenticeship. This transition has produced both opportunities and challenges.

Institutional education has made dance more accessible as an academic discipline. Students can study dance systematically, pursue undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, undertake research and engage with history, theory, criticism and documentation. The university also provides opportunities for interdisciplinary dialogue with subjects such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, education, literature and cultural studies. At the same time, institutional structures can make it difficult to accommodate forms of learning that depend on duration, repetition and bodily sensitivity. A student may understand the theoretical principles of a mudra in a written examination while still requiring considerable practice before the gesture becomes expressive and technically secure. This does not indicate a failure of academic education. Rather, it demonstrates that different forms of knowledge require different pedagogical processes.

A useful contemporary approach, therefore, would not attempt to choose between the traditional guru–shishya model and the university classroom. Instead, it would ask how the strengths of both can be brought into dialogue. The university can provide historical, textual and critical knowledge. The teacher can provide embodied demonstration. The learner can investigate through practice. Documentation can preserve processes that were previously transmitted orally. Research can critically examine assumptions within the tradition. Performance can become both an outcome and a mode of inquiry.

The issue, therefore, is not whether traditional or institutional education is better. The more productive question is how each can contribute to a richer educational ecology.

Dance and Curriculum: From Activity to Knowledge

One of the persistent problems in arts education is the tendency to classify artistic practices as supplementary. Dance may be included in an annual celebration, cultural programme or extracurricular timetable while remaining marginal to the central curriculum. Such a position changes when dance is approached as knowledge.

The NCF-SE 2023 is significant in this respect because it explicitly places dance and movement within curricular progression. At the preparatory stage, students encounter rhythm, tempo, body parts, postures, positions, movement and gesture. At later stages, the framework introduces concepts including abhinaya, fundamental dance steps, choreography, nritya, natya and aesthetic experience. This progression is important because it recognises that dance can be learned progressively and

systematically. Dance is not simply something students “do”; it can be something through which students develop concepts and competencies.

At the foundational stage, the NCF-FS 2022 specifically recognises children's exploration of voice, body, space and objects through music, role-play, dance and movement. It also includes the exploration of rhythm through bodily actions such as clapping, tapping, jumping and movement. The framework's pedagogical guidance encourages teachers to incorporate storytelling, dramatics, music, dance and play as engaging forms of pedagogy. These developments provide an important foundation for rethinking curriculum.

Dance can support learning across subjects without reducing itself to a mere teaching aid. Movement can help students experience mathematical ideas such as pattern, sequence and symmetry. Rhythmic structures can connect with mathematics and music. Gesture can open discussions of language and communication. Folk and classical dance traditions can introduce regional histories and cultural practices. Choreography can encourage collaborative problem-solving. Performance can require students to interpret, organise, revise and communicate ideas. The purpose, however, should not be to justify dance only because it helps students learn another subject. Dance possesses its own knowledge.

This distinction is crucial. If dance is valued only because it helps teach mathematics or language, its artistic and epistemological significance remains secondary. Dance should be recognised both as a subject in its own right and as a means of interdisciplinary learning.

The Moving Body as a Site of Cultural Memory

The body does not enter the classroom empty. It carries memory. A dancer trained in a particular tradition carries movement patterns, rhythms, gestures, postures and aesthetic conventions within the body. Through repeated practice, cultural knowledge becomes embodied. This is particularly important in India because dance traditions are deeply connected to linguistic, regional, religious, social and historical contexts. A movement can carry associations that are not immediately visible to an outside observer. The body can therefore function as an archive, but it is not a static archive. Unlike a written document, embodied knowledge changes each time it is performed. This is particularly evident in folk and community traditions. Knowledge may be transmitted informally through participation, observation, family, community events and repeated social practice rather than through a formal syllabus. Such informal transmission is itself an important form of embodied knowledge.

This observation has implications for curriculum design. If educational institutions recognise only codified and formally documented knowledge, many living traditions may become invisible. Curriculum can therefore become an important site for recognising diverse knowledge systems without turning them into museum objects. The challenge is to bring community knowledge into educational spaces respectfully. A folk tradition should not be stripped of its social context and converted simply into a short stage item. Similarly, a classical form should not be reduced to a collection of decorative gestures.

Students need opportunities to ask where a dance comes from, who performs it, how it is transmitted, what histories it carries, how it has changed and what meanings it holds for communities. In this sense, dance education can become cultural education.

Learning Through Practice: The Importance of Repetition

One of the least appreciated aspects of dance education is repetition. To an outside observer, repetition may appear mechanical. A dancer, however, experiences repetition differently. The first repetition may reproduce a movement; the hundredth repetition may reveal something about balance, timing, muscular coordination or expression that was not visible at the beginning. Repetition creates familiarity, but it can also create discovery. This is why practice should not be understood as merely preparing for performance. Practice is itself a form of investigation. A learner tests the body, receives feedback, adjusts the movement and tries again.

Donald Schön's concept of reflective practice is useful here. His work on professional knowledge emphasises reflection-in-action: practitioners often think through what they are doing while they are doing it rather than applying a fixed formula mechanically. Dance practice similarly involves continuous adjustment. A dancer notices that a movement is unstable, changes the distribution of weight, tries again and evaluates the result.

This creates a pedagogical cycle:

Practice → Observation → Adjustment → Re-practice → Reflection → New Understanding

Such a cycle is relevant beyond dance. It suggests a broader educational model in which learners are not simply recipients of correct answers but active participants in processes of experimentation and refinement. Dance makes this process unusually visible because the evidence of learning is often immediately present in the body.

The Teacher's Body and the Changing Role of the Teacher

Dance also encourages us to reconsider what a teacher does. In conventional descriptions of teaching, the teacher is often imagined as the person who possesses knowledge and communicates it to students. In embodied learning, the teacher performs a more complex role. The teacher demonstrates, observes, listens, corrects, questions, encourages and sometimes learns alongside the student. The teacher's own body becomes part of the teaching environment.

At the same time, the authority of the teacher should not become unquestionable. Traditional pedagogies can carry hierarchies that need critical examination. Contemporary educational practice can retain the value of close mentorship while creating greater space for student agency. This is particularly important in university-level dance education. Students should not merely reproduce the teacher's interpretation indefinitely. They should gradually acquire the capacity to analyse movement, make interpretive choices, question assumptions and develop individual artistic voices.

The teacher therefore becomes less a gatekeeper of a fixed body of knowledge and more a facilitator of a process through which students learn how to engage with tradition critically and creatively. This is not a rejection of discipline. On the contrary, artistic freedom becomes meaningful only when supported by sufficient technical understanding.

From Learning Dance to Learning Through Dance

A distinction between two educational possibilities is useful here. Learning dance refers to acquiring the skills, vocabulary, repertoire, history and aesthetic principles of a dance form. Learning through dance refers to the wider forms of understanding that

emerge through sustained engagement with movement. Both are important, but they are not identical.

Learning dance may involve mastering adavus, tatkar, chalis, mudras, rhythmic patterns, postures or repertoire depending on the tradition. Learning through dance may involve developing concentration, coordination, collaboration, cultural understanding, interpretive ability, confidence and reflective practice. The second category should not be used to diminish the first. Dance should not become merely a therapeutic or recreational instrument. Its disciplinary knowledge must remain central.

The educational strength of dance lies precisely in its ability to bring disciplinary and transferable forms of learning together. The challenge now lies in implementation. Policy recognition needs to be accompanied by suitable teacher preparation, infrastructure, curricular time and assessment practices.

Assessment: Can Embodied Knowledge Be Examined?

If the curriculum recognises embodied knowledge, assessment also needs reconsideration. Traditional written examinations are designed to measure particular forms of understanding. They can assess a student's knowledge of dance history, terminology, theory, aesthetics or textual sources. But they cannot by themselves adequately assess the quality of movement, rhythmic sensitivity, expressive interpretation, spatial awareness or the development of embodied understanding. Dance education therefore requires multiple forms of assessment.

Performance can be one form, but performance alone is insufficient. A student may perform successfully while having limited ability to articulate the process behind the performance. Conversely, a student may demonstrate significant conceptual understanding while still developing technical confidence. A more comprehensive assessment model might include practical performance, demonstration of technical development, reflective journals, oral discussion, written analysis, choreographic assignments, documentation of practice, peer feedback and research projects. Such assessment recognises that knowledge is multidimensional.

Reflection is especially important. After a performance or practice session, students can be encouraged to articulate what they attempted, what changed, what difficulties they encountered and what they discovered. In this way, bodily experience and intellectual reflection become connected. The aim is not to convert every movement into a numerical score. Rather, assessment should help students become conscious of their own learning.

Challenges in Institutionalising Embodied Learning

Recognising dance as knowledge does not automatically solve the practical difficulties of teaching it. The first challenge is time. Embodied learning requires sustained practice, while institutional curricula are often divided into short periods and tightly scheduled courses.

The second challenge is infrastructure. Dance requires appropriate space, flooring, acoustics and, in many cases, musical accompaniment. Not every educational institution has access to such resources.

The third challenge concerns teacher preparation. A teacher who is trained primarily in conventional classroom pedagogy may need additional preparation to integrate movement meaningfully into teaching.

The fourth challenge is assessment. Institutions often prefer easily quantifiable outcomes, whereas embodied learning may develop gradually and unevenly.

The fifth challenge is social perception. Dance can still be treated as less serious than academic subjects. This attitude affects students, parents, teachers and institutions. The sixth challenge concerns cultural representation. Indian dance traditions are diverse, and no single model can adequately represent the country's many regional and community practices. Curriculum must therefore avoid reducing Indian culture to a small collection of stereotypical classical forms.

These challenges suggest that curriculum reform cannot simply add dance to an existing timetable. A bigger change is required in the way educational institutions understand learning itself.

Toward an Embodied Curriculum

An embodied curriculum does not mean that students should spend the entire school day moving. Nor does it suggest that books, writing, mathematics, science or theoretical knowledge are less important. Instead, it asks for a more balanced understanding of how human beings learn. An embodied curriculum recognises that learners are simultaneously thinking, sensing, moving, remembering, feeling and interpreting. It creates opportunities for students to encounter knowledge through different modes and to connect those modes rather than separating them rigidly. Dance is particularly valuable because it brings several forms of knowledge together. A dancer may encounter a literary text, understand its meaning, hear it set to music, interpret its emotional content and embody it through gesture and movement. A single performance can therefore become an interdisciplinary encounter involving literature, music, history, aesthetics, physical practice and cultural memory.

The curriculum can also become a space for dialogue between traditional and contemporary knowledge. Indian dance traditions need not be frozen in their historical forms to be respected. Students can study tradition while also asking how traditions change, why they change and how performers negotiate continuity and innovation. Such an approach transforms the student from a passive receiver into a participant in knowledge production.

Dance as Knowledge Production

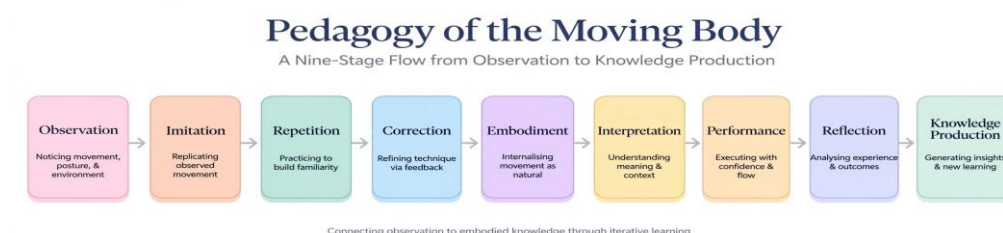
The most important argument of this article is that dance does not merely transmit knowledge; it can produce knowledge. Knowledge is produced when the learner encounters a movement and asks how it works. It is produced when a dancer experiments with rhythm and discovers a new relationship between music and movement. It is produced when a student reinterprets a traditional composition in response to a contemporary context. It is produced when a community performer carries inherited movement into a new social environment. Practice therefore becomes a research process. This understanding is particularly important for higher education. Universities increasingly recognise practice-based and practice-led research in the arts. Dance offers an especially productive field because the body can function simultaneously as the object, medium and instrument of inquiry.

A dancer-researcher may investigate a historical text by reconstructing movement. A choreographer may explore a social issue through embodied experimentation. A teacher may investigate pedagogical methods through classroom practice. A performer may document how a traditional vocabulary changes when transmitted to a new generation. In each case, movement is not merely illustrating an already established argument. Movement participates in the formation of the argument. This perspective also helps challenge the hierarchy between theory and practice. The dancer is not

simply the person who “does” while the scholar “thinks”. Practice can generate questions, concepts and interpretations, while theory can provide tools for understanding practice.

The most productive relationship is therefore not simply Theory → Practice, but Theory ↔ Practice ↔ Reflection ↔ New Knowledge.

A Proposed Pedagogical Model:



This model should not be interpreted as a rigid sequence. Learning frequently moves backwards and forwards between stages. A performance may reveal a technical problem that requires renewed observation and repetition. Reflection may lead to a new interpretation. A new interpretation may require changes in movement. The important principle is that movement and thought remain in dialogue.

Conclusion

The moving body has always been present in education, but educational systems have not always recognised what the body knows. Dance makes this hidden dimension of learning visible. A dancer learns through observation, imitation, repetition, correction, sensation, memory, interpretation and performance. Such learning is intellectual as well as physical. It requires attention, discipline, imagination, cultural understanding and critical reflection. The Indian educational context is increasingly opening space for this broader understanding. NEP 2020's emphasis on holistic and experiential education, NCF-FS 2022's attention to children's bodily and creative engagement, and NCF-SE 2023's curricular recognition of dance and movement collectively provide an important policy environment for reconsidering the place of embodied learning. Yet policy recognition is only the beginning. The deeper challenge is pedagogical. Educational institutions need to recognise that not every form of knowledge arrives through a textbook, and not every form of understanding can be adequately measured through a written examination. Dance offers an alternative without demanding the rejection of established academic knowledge. It reminds education that the body is not merely the vehicle that carries the learner into the classroom. The body participates in learning itself. For Indian education, this insight has particular significance because the country possesses diverse traditions in which knowledge has historically travelled through voice, gesture, rhythm, movement, memory and embodied practice. Bringing these traditions into contemporary education requires care, critical engagement and respect for their social contexts. It also requires avoiding the romanticisation of tradition. The future of dance education, therefore, may lie neither in reproducing the past unchanged nor in abandoning inherited practices in favour of entirely new pedagogies. It may lie in creating a dialogue between tradition and contemporary educational thought. Such a dialogue can transform the classroom. The teacher demonstrates but also listens. The student imitates but also interprets. Practice

reproduces tradition but can also generate new questions. Performance demonstrates learning but can also become a form of inquiry. Reflection connects bodily experience with intellectual understanding. Ultimately, the pedagogy of the moving body asks education to expand its definition of knowledge. To know is not always to be able to explain. Sometimes to know is to sense, to move, to remember, to adjust, to interpret and to respond. Dance makes this possibility visible.

The moving body, therefore, is not simply a body that performs knowledge already acquired elsewhere. It can be a body through which knowledge is experienced, negotiated, transformed and produced.

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