Can you relate to a dance from the past?

Why teenagers love to dance in museums

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**Abstract:** This article is about the curation of youth dance programmes in museums that have been initiated and produced by the Norwegian Centre for Traditional Music and Dance (Sff). Located in Trondheim, Norway, this contains one of Northern Europe’s largest dance film archives. Through different channels of dissemination, the centre makes its old dance recordings relevant for different groups of users and potential users of various ages. This article explores how we can facilitate a dialogue amongst the youth on the relevance of the old dance recordings, and how we can influence the way young people understand their own dance expressions. The article also discusses whether conversations about dance and dance traditions combined with dance instruction make the links between the older and the younger generations’ dance expressions any easier.

**Keywords:** Dance, intangible cultural heritage, museums, participation, co-creation, curation, facilitator, dance traditions.
music. Its main goals are to promote, safeguard and carry on traditional Norwegian music and dance as expressions of cultural identity that bear unique qualities. It is home to a large dance film archive documented and collected from the early 1960s to present day.

In this article, I describe how the youth in three different outreach programmes relate to the archived dance material while learning traditional dances. I also examine how the concepts of involvement and participation apply to the transmission of intangible cultural heritage in Norway, especially in archives and museums. I argue that there is a link between the dialogic role of a facilitator and that of an arts-based researcher. I further describe how this combination of roles is a good method for transmitting ICH to young people and helping them understand the relevance of old archive clips. What is the best way to meet with old dance clips so that young people understand their relevance and meaning? How can museum dance curators facilitate the main goal of social dance, which is; to experience the simple enjoyment in dance participation? How can they convey that being together on the dance floor is more important than just doing the right dance steps?

The three outreach programmes were conducted at two museums for the project Museene danser (Dancing Museums) in 2017, 2018 and 2022. Museene danser started in 2015 as a development project based on a study of methods for the dissemination of dance in ten European museums (Erlien 2014). The project is a collaboration between the Sff and MiST – the Museums of South Trondelag.

Museene danser is a research and development concept focused on how a curator can transmit music and dance as intangible cultural heritage through films, dance parties/events and teaching, with the goal of experiencing the relationship between music and dance. The outreach programmes differ from an introductory course in dance for beginners in that they are aimed at giving the youth keys to understanding their (inherent) responsibility as individual human beings in the transmission of the embodied knowledge of dancing and its cultural heritage context. I will now discuss the innovative methods of these outreach programmes, and whether they present the good strategies and conditions for dance that the Sff as an NGO of ICH, wants to promote.

**Methodological Approach**

While attending the NTNU Programme for Dance Studies, I studied old, archived dance films and learned to embody their variations captured on film to help me understand, and realize, the dance concept of the performer. The dance concept is what performers and others understand a dance to be, plus how it is performed and developed over time by reproduced versions of a dance realization (Bakka & Gore 2007). A detailed analysis of many dance concept realizations of the same dance in film recordings, together with interviews and descriptions, provides the analysis and knowledge from which to produce pedagogical methods for teaching dance variations that now only exist on film. The pedagogical methods are grounded in an ideal that traditional dance is first and foremost a form of socialization.

During further innovative research for and development of Museene danser, while employed at the Sff as a dance curator of five dance exhibitions, I have developed methods of dissemination that make these old archive clips relevant in a new setting and new context for the public. An example of this is how the
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younger generation encounter the archived material in a museum setting. The methods used are in line with arts-based research and new museology trends. They differ from the Sff’s usual practice of researching archive film clips. These reflective dissemination methods aim to give meaning, be relevant to new audiences, and trigger curiosity on a group level by regarding the audience as a collection of individuals.

As the one designing the programme, conducting the dissemination of it, and conducting research, I find it important to raise some methodological questions. I will look at them from two different perspectives. The first is research with the art methodology of practices and choices. Here the researcher does investigations in a creative, complex and critical process that includes the researcher’s thoughts, senses and sensibilities, experiences, their own artistic practices, as well as their choices of ethical dilemmas and text work (Østern 2017, Østern & Letnes 2017). This implies that the research questions take shape from an investigation in the artistic practice, and that they are meaning-seeking rather than defined beforehand. The questions are often designed to stimulate more and new questions rather than providing and describing clear answers. They focus on investigation, understanding, meaning, development and perspectives. Knowledge production happens in and through action. This kind of research is interesting and complex because it is lived, can be felt, and is therefore affective and effective. It is personal and close, and it often brings about change, both for the researcher and research participants (Østern 2017).

The other perspective, practice-oriented ethnography, was developed to study embodied and tacit dimensions of practice. In terms of Lièvre and Rix-Lièvre’s (2013) explanation, I take the role of the participative expert. It is a practice where reflections on content and form are continuously part of the research process, and as an observant participant, I can take into account the volatile and dynamic dimensions of the research practice (Knudsen 2018). In other words, my experiences with the researched dance activity will affect the spontaneous understanding of what is happening in the activity and will define what is strange about it. On the other hand, the research becomes complex, because the empirical material cannot necessarily be obtained through established qualitative or quantitative methods, nor through the detached and observant researcher. This type of research is guided and formed by personal values and preconceptions. There is a risk that the research becomes too internal. It is therefore very important to make transparent and reflective choices of form and content. This leads to interesting insights into ways to explore, question, and understand the researched activity.

Based on my background as a dance pedagogue, creative curator and museum pedagogue, I created a programme where I combined film, the teaching of dance, dialogue of dance, and participation in a dance party. I thus curated an artistic experience that was finally to be co-curated/filled with the youth participants. This explains why I chose to get personally involved and participated in many of the processes in the research. The young people in the programme were co-responsible for filling in the content. To get access to the content, I used participant interactive facilitation as a method on the dance floor in the actual artistic experience. My notes from this participation and dialogue with the youth served as the data collected on the smallest, but central components in performative research.
to produce knowledge epistemologically, with interactive researcher-participant relations as lived experience and feelings (Knudsen 2018). The younger generation are reflected participants. They can recognize the meaning of what they do and articulate those reflections (Yanow & Tsoukas 2007:15). It is significant to see how I as a researcher could use a method as supportive aid to return to and reflect on the intended action, to review the situation they were in. This is done to inform the researcher about what matters, and to use inter-subjectivity to approach what the subject has experienced, what affected them, and (or) what was significant for them. As Vermersch claims, “to understand and analyse the course of the action (…) the verbalizations will come to complement the information brought by what is observable and the traces of fulfilled action” (Vermersch 2003:19). Further, “an exterior observation is neither sufficient to account for, nor to explain the activity” (Vermersch 2004:356). As such, an action has one public and behaviourally observable side, and one private and non-observable (Yanow & Tsoukas 2007).

I will now elaborate on why these research methods are useful for gaining insight into dissemination and co-methods in new museology trends.1

Museums and their Dancing Audience

The premises containing our archive do not facilitate large scale public visits. Museene danser began collaborating with museums in Trondheim, and as part of the archive, we realised the value of exploiting the museums’ arena for meeting and interacting with the public. As a concept of dissemination, we promoted our archive material and helped the museums to make good surrounding frameworks for disseminating ICH. At the same time, the public were given a physical place to meet heirs of the heritage (Bakka 1992), the dancers, and more context than a normal visit from a dance group. The concept allows participation in a realization of the term “expressive life” when it comes to cultural heritage. The expression “expressive life” has two connotations according to Bill Ivey (2009): “heritage” for the part that denotes continuity and affinity in relation to identity questions, and “voice” as an individual expression giving space for the personal. This is in addition to the global and the independent, which challenge the notion of heritage. This explanation in relation to dance transmission also has a notion of innovation in it (Erlien 2014).

According to Bernadette Lynch (2017), museums should emphasise how they can be relevant to new and old visitors, and this opens up possibilities when it comes to dealing with or curating intangible cultural heritage. According to “new museum” methodologies, museums and cultural heritage institutions should be used for social bridging; and by opening doors for new communities, stakeholders and visitors, museums become relevant and meaningful to a broader audience. There is focus on “actual social practices rather than wishful thinking” (Cornwall & Eade 2010). The practice of engaging with the visitors can be described in different ways and with different words: engagement, involvement, interaction, and participation. These are concepts of cooperation between museums and external groups (Krankenhagen 2013). The methods used are often dialogue, co-creation or other forms of cooperation towards a goal, and as Jim Richardson (2015) argues, it would be useful to think of the cooperating groups as consisting of participants rather than...
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In Lynch’s words “(...) through dialogue with their local communities, museums explore their assumptions when engaging with communities, considering the way they anticipate will take which role in participatory encounters, active and passive, carer, and beneficiary” (Lynch 2017:25). The goal should be that visitors and cultural institutions should be two equal negotiating partners instead of the institution operating as the carer and the visitors becoming beneficiaries, similar to the aim of co-creative methods in museum curation.

Nina Simon's me-to-we design (2010) is also pertinent in this regard as a method for connecting individuals to other individuals, such as in the regular realization of dance participation. In this method, dance should be used as an experience that encourages people to participate socially with each other – individual experiences that support collective engagement. By connecting individuals to other individuals, they will start to feel that they are part of a communal experience. Simon writes that this will develop a cultural institution into a social hub, where the staff members are responsible for connecting people through the content on display. She also proposes a five-stage interface between institution and visitor. All stages share the content as the common principle, and stage 5 makes the entire institution feel like a social place. If the problem of a non-existing facilitator arises and the social engagement ceases to exist, then designing stage 3 and 4 can help encourage unfacilitated social experiences (Simon 2010). Unfacilitated social experiences are what occur in an ordinary dance party; and what is lacking in the five-stage scale could be a focus on the enjoyment of one's own artistic expression in interaction with other dancers. All stages share the content as the common principle, and
stage 5 makes the entire institution feel like a social place.

From a dance curator’s perspective, a me-to-we design with dance as the content contains two factors: actual dancing, which is embodied or tacit knowledge as a metacultural production made by conversation processes (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004:59) that we access by a realization of dance practice, and dialogue. A dialogue, as Burbules (2007) argues, has a dynamic character and is composed of giving and taking processes. Dialogue can lead to new knowledge, but also to amazement and uncertainty, which again lead to an opportunity to ask new questions.

A person that uses dialogue to make people feel important could be the museum curator. Several researchers in museum studies suggest that curators, who are cultural content specialists on tangible assets, rather should become facilitators. A facilitator is a neutral person that helps a group of people articulate their common objectives and assists them in planning and finding ways to achieve their objectives, in addition to helping them understand/formulate the challenges they face along the way.

Facilitators do not hold a position of authority, imparting knowledge that they alone possess. Instead, they put in place structures and processes which will assist the group in communicating their own ideas (Schwartz et al. 1995). A related concept is that of a cultural broker. Museum and ICH expert Richard Kurin (1997) argues that culture brokers study, understand, and represent someone’s culture (even sometimes their own) to non-specialised others through various means and media. “Brokering” also captures the idea that these representations are to some degree negotiated, dialogical, and driven by a variety of interests on behalf of the involved parties. (Kurin 1997).

The role of cultural brokering should be combined with working co-creatively. Co-creation defines a partnership in which both parties define their needs and goals at a project’s inception and work together towards fulfilling them (Van Mensch & Meijer-van Mensch 2011). According to the criteria, the communities should have more power than in a regular participatory project. The goals of both the institutions and communities should be achieved, and the finished outcome of the collaboration co-owned by the community and institution. In this way, one can see the link between the dialogic role of a facilitator and that of an arts-based researcher as explained above. It is also clear that this is a good method for transmitting ICH to young people, and for helping them understand the relevance of old archive material.

By means of descriptions from the outreach programmes, let us now examine the facilitator’s role in helping youngsters to make sense of the old dance clips, and to enjoy the transmission of dance in the project Museene danser.

**SVERRESBORG**

For three weeks during the winter of 2017, several groups of school pupils aged ten to twelve participated in an outreach programme that Museene danser provided through the Cultural Schoolbag (Den kulturelle skolesekken) in Trondheim county. The programme took place at Skogheim, an old community house in Trøndelag Folkemuseum, an open-air museum in Trondheim. Skogheim was at its peak in the 1960s. It hosted bingo nights, Christmas parties, debates, political meetings, and regular dance evenings organized by the neighbouring communities. Skogheim hosted the dance exhibition Livets dans during the winter of
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2017, which consisted partly of archive films, sound recordings of dance stories and old photos of dancing in community houses. A cartoon magazine presented information about dance traditions, dance parties, and dance in everyday life in the Trøndelag region. Furniture, a typical backstage setting, and musical instruments from the 1950s and 1960s were also part of the exhibition. In the main dance hall, an installation projected life-size dancers on three of the walls, with speakers in each corner. Visitors could experience dance in the house at any time by turning on the film projector, and many were inspired to join in.

Each school programme lasted for 90 minutes and involved twenty pupils. They entered the warm community house and took their seats, with fiddle music playing in the background. The first posti of the programme was to talk about what a museum is, what dance is, and if a museum could take care of dance in the same way as material things like a chair. We talked about the community house, with its own customs and norms, and how it was a place for having fun and relaxing after a hard day’s work in rural Norway.

The next part of the programme was a 20-minute black and white archive film which showed how a community house in the 1970s hosted dance parties for three different generations, and how these generations had their preferred dances. While the older generation danced the pols and the round dances waltz, schottis, polka and mazurka to music performed by fiddle players or accordion players, the parent generation also danced the swing and simple one-step dances, and the band could have more instruments. These two generations danced in couples. The younger generation did the “strekkbuksepolka”, the twist and other dances of the 1970s that involved not touching one’s partner, and this was to band music. In response to facilitator/dance pedagogue’s questions about what they could see, the pupils typically made remarks such as: “Are all the couples boyfriend and girlfriend?”, “Did they get dizzy waltzing around?”, “Wow, what large speakers!”, “I danced like that at a wedding with my mum once”, “The young people had the coolest music” and “We’ve also learned that dance at school!”. I asked them about which dances they do today and when and where they do them. Several mentioned social evenings with their classmates, the youth club and the Christmas ball as the occasions when they dance, in addition to physical education classes at school. They commented on the dresses and outfits of the dancers. The level of reflection of this age group implies that they comment on what they see, comparing it to what they know about movement and dance today.

Since a school class comprises a plurality of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, we discussed what happens with dance as people travel abroad and overseas. The pupils with non-Norwegian backgrounds told us how they felt about dance in Trondheim today, and whether they knew dances from their country of origin. We talked about what a tradition is, how old a tradition is, and how a tradition continues, transmitted to new generations. They agreed that for something intangible to survive, it had to be used and taught. And, as the pedagogical programme’s host, I tasked the pupils and their generation with being responsible for the death of the waltz. The different groups of pupils then, without exception, asked me to teach them the dance. I invited the pupils to join me on the floor and taught them the waltz, schottis and the twist. The pupils participated, had fun and enjoyed being active on the dance floor, despite still observing the rules (Fig. 1).
The second lot of young people involved all the 10th grade students in the county of Trondheim for almost two months in early 2018. Each time, the students were divided into three groups of twenty and visited for one and a half hours. The groups started on one of three interactive programme posts and then rotated among the three posts. The first of these was a dance class; the second was a visit of the exhibition with VR glasses, an interactive puzzle, a documentary about dance in Trondheim and a dance hit loop; and the third was a dance film talk session. For the dance class, each group learned one social dance. It could be a waltz, line dance, salsa, traditional couple dance, traditional halling dance or Gangnam style dance. As a fourth post, all the groups gathered in the main dance hall to perform their dance, and then informally invited the other groups to join them in order to transfer their dance knowledge kinaesthetically to the other.
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The qualities of each clip were discussed: “The Norwegian tango is less classy but easier to dance”, and “It looks like a typical Norwegian folk dance that our parents or grandparents could have danced”. This dialogue, involving give and take, helped the teenagers express how they were affected by the dance teaching session, and to see the broader picture of why people around the world dance socially.

Following this discussion, we compared a traditional waltz from the Norwegian countryside with the English waltz danced in the TV programme Dancing with the Stars. The waltz is a global dance with so many expressions and forms, and it is danced to a range of music. The waltz is a good example of a dance that is local and yet global, and the students discussed whether all variations could be considered equivalent. In learning the dance by copying the dance teacher, they experienced how simple it can be in its form. This led to an understanding that the core of the dance is about waltzing, dancing around, and that even variations in steps, degrees of rotating and directions of rotation do not prevent such versions of the dance from being a waltz. We also talked about and tested how each realization of the dance can possibly make a change in the dancing concept (Bakka & Gore 2007) if it is repeated enough times to become a permanent variation in the structure used by a person or a group of dancers. The fact that a dance can die out also made the students interested in understanding the movements and how they can change over time.

The dance film talk session included a total of fifteen different films, like a short journey through the dancing world. Dances shown were the old galliard, singing games in Norway, a dance school performance, ballet, the Charleston, tango, a Norwegian form of swing, the halling dance, street dance, legény tánca.
salsa, pols from Norway, dances from Uganda, as well as the English waltz and waltz from Norway. By disseminating pols from Norway, dances from Uganda, and a clip of a salsa rueda session, the students readily responded that the common characteristic was the social aspect of the dances – an activity done in common in a social setting. The differences were the functional contextualisation, as well as the cultural location of the dances (Fig. 2).

In 2022, the programme at Rockheim was repeated, but with a few changes. The exhibition *Everybody dance!* served as one of the posts, and the post involved dialogue about dance film clips and tradition. The themes of the exhibition were: sharing dance, tradition, community and identity, from body to body and the power of dance, and all concerned dance as a social practice. One post was a dance craze workshop, where the students were creative and made their own short dance craze to an even beat rhythm. As in 2018, the group was divided into three. They learned one couple dance each, which they performed and shared with the other groups at the end of the programme. With this programme, the students did not only experience a regular dance course through learning from dancing with another person, but also through copying dance movements from watching and trying.
In the dance party session at the end of the programme, one could see a whole floor of students concentrating on moving, dancing and sharing the three learned dances, plus copying two more by watching the dance facilitator/museum pedagogue. They laughed, flirted, smiled, and even encouraged their teacher to dance. In the end, when the disco music started, one could see that this music was harder to dance freely to, and that the macarena song/dance was a much better choice when it came to getting the party started. They seemed more self-conscious when dancing disco. When I asked for comments on “why do we dance?”, “who do we dance with?” and other feedback, the students gave answers such as; “togetherness”, “each other”, “to have fun”, “to be in the moment”, “to notice each other”, saying that they were “having fun”, and that “it’s good to know how to dance”. Some of the boys stated that this was more fun than a regular P.E. class at school. Teachers said that they were touched by seeing their students daring to dance, with everyone joining in, and that they saw examples of inclusion in actual situations on the dance floor. Students also reported that it felt good that no one was watching what they did because everyone was on the dance floor. From their responses to questions during the programme, it seemed that they were anxious about performing. Teachers commented that it was a big bonus to get students to understand that they can also participate in this kind of dancing and practise being good members of the audience in real life, not only on screen. It was also a positive experience for the students to reflect on the possibility of exploring and expressing emotions, enjoyment, and the sense of community. The written response from teachers confirmed these statements and included positive feedback on the dance programme from conversations with families and at school.

**Involvement and Participation in the Transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage**

The wish to engage children and students in this kind of dance dissemination is part of the attempt to appeal to a wide range of people who are not necessarily interested in exploring the dance content on a deeper level, but who could be reached through storytelling, conversations and sharing (Theimer 2016). Recruiting new heirs to a dance tradition and community is also a prerequisite for intangible cultural heritage to be transmitted and safeguarded.

Watching old archive recordings is like travelling back in time. As well as facilitating the interpretation and contextualization of the dance, getting the youth to understand old dances is of great importance in making the dance transmission relevant. This was achieved through student participation from the very beginning. They saw and commented on the enjoyment of dance in the recordings of the waltz. The facilitator was inspired by this answer and their understanding of the filmed dance, and made dance enjoyment the goal for dance embodiment on the dance floor. Through an emphasis on enjoyment in a simple structured dance when teaching and transmitting the embodied knowledge to the students, they were met on their own level of understanding of the dance context. Even if it takes time, effort, and involvement to understand the deeper cultural context of a dancing situation, all students and children understood that dancing is a living heritage that is constantly changeable, and that may be enjoyed for pleasure. Understanding and relevance are keywords for active participation
in knowledge production. Understanding is a process that can be reached through interpretation, helping to draw meaning from the smallest detail to the whole. New details will meet new conditions that ensure a continued broader understanding. In this hermeneutic circle theory, meaning is gradually added for people to see patterns in how different conditions fit together; and in the cases above, the students and children are the body that will confirm or deny what the pedagogue is trying to achieve (Black 2005).

For the teenagers in the second and third programs, they needed the meta perspective obtained through their dancing and reflections on their performance to see the value of the embodied knowledge in the archive material. They could understand and relate to today’s global dance forms and dance contexts, reflecting on how the old dances were once popular dances and why people danced back then as a dialogical method with the aim of reviewing the situation they were in when dancing themselves. This is so because a clarification of their own ideals through which to interpret the dance affects how they would...
interpret the source, an insight which again affects their ideals (Nilsson 1998, Bakka 2011).

For children without any previous knowledge of couple dances, it is a new experience to move to music together with a classmate, and perhaps a kind of interaction that is totally different from what they can relate to. The methodological ideology of the Sff is that dance qualities are best achieved by learning through dancing with others, without much explanation, and with the experience of dance enjoyment and commitment as a number one goal. The objective is to develop automatized dancing, with a personal style, improvisation, variation and rhythmical expression as the fundamental aesthetics. This provides the flexibility to dance using the body one has, rather than exhibiting strict bodily and technical behaviour due to external rules for shapes, holding hands, formations and motifs. Dance qualities will develop by dancing often and with different partners, through a long, non-reflective and intuitive learning process (Fig. 3).

But perhaps even more important is the aspect of experiencing a dance party and bearing in one’s body the enjoyment of the relational aspect of dancing after talks, reflections and explorations through the interactive installations. A dance event is a focused gathering with a perceptual focus on dancing as what should happen – and needs an expressive specialist to retain a plausibility of it, in danger of the activity being questioned and threatened. The expressive specialist, with a special interest and competence in dance interaction, is in charge of establishing the interaction required and maintaining it during the event (Rönstrom 1989).

The programme facilitator acted as the expressive specialist, or a participant expert researcher in practice-oriented ethnography. By helping the group to understand and achieve structures and processes, the facilitator assists the group in communicating their own ideas in the learning environment, as participants of dance practice. In this case, it may be to help utilize the previous knowledge of the students to better understand and respond to the new cultural insight they are exposed to. This is in line with the question of relevance and meaning-seeking to become participants with the power of defining their goals and needs. As such, the finished outcome should be owned by the young people and the institution. Therefore, the youth must experience a dance event as a creation of the present based on the past, and with anticipation of the future. The Faro Convention (Council of Europe 2005) proclaims that communities (such as the young people in this case) have the right to define the status of a common heritage and what they will transmit to new generations. Article twelve of the convention highlights participation and encourages this in the process of identification, study, interpretation, protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural heritage, taking into consideration the value attached by each heritage community.

So how, then, can a museum dance curator facilitate the main goal of social dance: to experience the simple enjoyment of dance participation; to experience that being together on the dance floor is more important than just doing the right dance steps? The examples that I have given in this article illustrate the importance of facilitating the relevance of and the link between traditions of different age groups, all in order to get the youth to dance and participate. The three pedagogical programmes were different in form and content but still very similar in terms of goals and ideology. The best possible way to understand old archive dance material and the context
of the dances shown is through facilitated dialogue and the embodied transmission of the knowledge captured on film.

The dialogical role of a facilitator is essential because it is only through dialogue that young people can understand that they have a voice to express their rights. They have a role in the safeguarding of dance practices, and it matters. It is important to let the youth execute their rights of being co-creative or co-responsible for the heritage to survive. This gives them the flexibility to adjust and colour the living dance tradition in their individual ways, while at the same time giving them points to relate to, according to their age and level of competence in reflection and physical expressions. Thus, young people are essential for conducting the programme itself; they are, in other words, more important than the museum.

Dialogue is used for raising awareness and information purposes, but it is also used in the facilitation of dance practice contexts to experience the actual immaterialness of intangible cultural heritage. The acquired body knowledge affects the youth, enabling them to take decisions about continuing the realization of the embodied dance concept or not. In other words, they need to understand the relational importance of cultural heritage to physically participate in it. Being present at the moment of importance, the arts-based researcher or facilitator can capture the dynamic dimensions of the “give and take” processes in a dialogue (Burbules 2007), capture the amazement and the uncertainty – and, through storytelling, plant a seed for new engaging questions.

Note

1. For discussions on dance and new museology, see Erlien 2014.

Literature


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https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/faro-convention


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