

A man with curly hair and glasses, wearing a white shirt, a dark blue vest, a striped tie, and bright orange trousers, is captured in a dynamic dance pose. He is laughing with his head tilted back, one arm raised and pointing upwards, and his right leg is kicked high. The background is a dark, textured wall with a grid of square panels. The floor is dark wood.

Peter Lovatt is a Reader in Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire. Before starting on an academic career Peter was a professional dancer. As a TV dance psychologist he has appeared on many popular shows, including *Strictly Come Dancing: It Takes Two* and *The Graham Norton Show*.

# DANCE on the MIND

### You are a dance psychologist – what is that?

A dance psychologist studies dance and dancers from a psychological perspective, and does so using scientific methods. Dance psychologists address questions such as 'Are humans born to dance?' 'Why does dancing have an impact on a person's self-esteem?' 'How do dancers remember such long movement sequences?' and 'Why does dancing make us better problem solvers?' Dance psychologists are curious about the social, biological, cognitive and developmental aspects of being a dancer, of teaching dancers and of watching dance.

### You are currently Reader and Principal Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire where you run the Dance Psychology Lab. What does the Lab do?

The Dance Psychology Lab is currently engaged in a programme of research looking at the effect of dancing on people with Parkinson's disease. We have seen through previous studies that when people with Parkinson's dance it can lead to a significant, and clinically relevant, reduction in some of their symptoms. This is extraordinary, especially as Parkinson's is a neurodegenerative disorder. We are currently looking at the rhythm and timing abilities of people with and without Parkinson's to try to understand what it is about moving to different rhythmic patterns that changes the symptoms of Parkinson's. The Dance Psychology Lab is also engaged in several other research projects.

### On BBC Radio 4's *Saturday Live* programme in February this year you said dance helped you learn to read – can you explain how?

Because I had severe reading difficulties I thought I was stupid and therefore incapable of learning anything as complex as the written word. Dancing made me realise that I could already learn and communicate highly complex patterns. Dancing gave me the confidence to apply myself to reading. It made me realise that I was not stupid (which is a huge barrier to learning). If I could learn, remember, and understand the subtle nuances of a piece of dance then, I thought, I

DANCING

PERFORMING

VOCATIONAL

MOVEMENT

SELF-ESTEEM

PSYCHOLOGY

LEARNING

BORN TO DANCE



## Dance is one of the most important, and innate, of all human behaviours

EXAMS

TECHNIQUE

PROGRESSION

CONFIDENCE

ACHIEVEMENT

OBJECTIVES

PATTERNS

must be capable of doing the same with the written word. When I was in my early twenties, I used the way I learnt to dance as a framework for learning how to read.

### Do you think dance could help others with similar reading difficulties?

Yes. There are some reading programmes, aimed at young children, which use dance as a vehicle for learning to read, such as the Basic Reading

Through Dance Programme. I believe programmes such as this could be extended to help people of all ages tackle the complexities of the written word.

### You were Senior Research Fellow at Cambridge University from 1998 to 2000. What was the main focus of your work during this time?

At Cambridge University I was carrying out research looking at how humans learn multiple languages, such as French, Italian, English etc. It occurred to me that dance is a form of language too and it was at that point that I wanted to understand how humans learn different dance 'languages'.

### Before studying the psychology of dance you were a professional dancer, having trained in dance and musical theatre at the Guildford School of Acting. Had you done any ISTD dance exams while you were learning to dance?

While training I took ISTD vocational grades in Tap, Ballet, Modern Theatre Dance and National. I loved the Cecchetti syllabus, which was taught by Angela Hardcastle, and even attended the ISTD Cecchetti Teacher's Summer School about 10 years ago (though, for the record, I haven't touched a glass of Pimm's since).

### Do you think dance exams are helpful to those learning dance? And if so, why?

I think dance exams are extremely helpful in introducing some dancers to appropriate technique, providing clear learning objectives that are nicely staged for progression, and can help people to build confidence and have a sense of achievement. However, there will be some people who want to learn to dance but don't

want to be put through potentially stressful dance exams. We know that being judged can cause an increase in levels of cortisol in dancers, the stress hormone.

**You combined the study of dance and psychology in 2008 and since then your work has been reported on TV, radio and in the press, where you have become known as 'Doctor Dance'. What was it that started this chain of events?**

The Daily Telegraph heard about my research and published a piece on it. This article sparked an interest and I was invited onto lots of TV and radio shows to talk about the psychology of dance. I was on a couple of TV shows, one of which was *The Graham Norton Show*, where I was referred to either as the 'Doctor of Dance' or as 'Doctor Dance'. The name 'Doctor Dance' stuck and since then it has become something of a stage name.

**As a TV dance psychologist you've appeared on many popular shows, including *Strictly Come Dancing: It Takes Two*, *The Alan Titchmarsh Show* and *Big Brother's Bit on the Side*. Did you have any idea that studying dance psychology might lead you into this media career?**

Absolutely not! As a professional dancer I loved performing but as an academic research psychologist I didn't think I'd ever get the chance to perform again. However, by combining dance and academic psychology I now get the chance to work with dancers and choreographers and to make new theatre and TV shows. For example, I'm currently touring the UK with a show called *Boogie on the Brain* and in 2016 I went out to Los Angeles to film a pilot for a new TV show about how dancing can make people happier. I am also very excited about a current TV project, which will involve working with a very famous ex-ballerina (sorry, but I'm not allowed to tell you her name) on the relationship between dance and mood.

## Having an understanding of the psychology of dancers, and the dance environment, can help dance teachers to optimise the effectiveness of their training

**Can dance psychology help working dance teachers? And if so, how?**

Yes, dance psychology can help working dance teachers. Having an understanding of the psychology of dancers, and the dance environment, can help dance teachers to optimise the effectiveness of their training. For example, dance psychology can help teachers understand why some dancers learn faster or slower than others, why some people want and need to receive corrections while other people crumble when they receive corrections. It can help

understand the impact of having mirrors in the studio and of the potential consequences of wearing a leotard in class. It can increase awareness of the issues around teaching people who have a wide range of emotional and cognitive disorders. It can help with thinking about improvisation and the role and use of marking movements on a dancer's ability to be emotionally expressive during performances. It can help teachers think about choreography and about the importance of sleep in learning to dance. Dancer's brains become different from the brains of non-dancers, and dance teaching and practice play a central role in a dancer's neurological development.

**If you could give one piece of advice to your younger dancer self, what would it be?**

Remember that dance is one of the most important, and innate, of all human behaviours, and that if anyone ever criticises you for dancing, or tries to stop or prevent you from dancing, then it is that person who needs to change.

*Interview by Tamsin Moore*

**CLICK** You can catch up with Peter's talks on TEDx Talks on YouTube where he explains in a fun and accessible way how dancing is a fundamental part of who we are and can have a huge impact on

our ability to learn. Peter's book, *Dance Psychology*, is a great place to start your learning journey if you're interested in finding out more. It is available at [www.peterlovatt.com](http://www.peterlovatt.com) and in all good bookshops.



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