

Devising Dance Performance with adults with learning disabilities

An exploration of disability, dance and artistry, with special reference to Opening Doors dance ensemble

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The conceptualization of a dance devising model significant to *Opening Doors* dance collective is the aim of this study, referred to the *Adaptive Facilitation model* – a framework encouraging collaboration with young adults with learning dis/abilities. The approach exposes and discusses an active approach to creating dance performance, allowing people with learning disabilities to take ownership in their creations. This work highlights the importance of the dance members' role within the dance devising process, identifying a shared participation within the preparation for dance performance. The idea of active engagement goes about questioning the abilities of people with learning disabilities and being inquisitive of how and why cultural representations somehow de-value their presence in performance and in Maltese society.

The analysis and conceptualization of the *Adaptive Facilitation model*, which is based on practical research as methodology, is an active, collective choreographic approach suited for the *Opening Doors* dancers' needs. This process focuses on the dancers' uniqueness, strength and ability, allowing for the construction of a new body of knowledge about dance devising, learning disabilities and the relationship between the two to emerge.

DISABILITY AND ARTS CONTEXT IN MALTA

In order to understand the complexity of the disability context in relation to the arts, it is integral to understand the social, political and personal histories. Communities and cultures have developed their discourse and perceptions on disability through time. Perceptions towards people with disabilities have been highly influenced by two models, the medical and socio-cultural model, which explain how perceptions towards people with a disability have in the past fluctuated from indifference, to brutal, to compassionate, as described by Henri-Jacques Stiker, in his text, »A History of Disability« (1999). Such perceptions have encouraged further the discourse and conceptions of »functional deficit, personal tragedy, cure and care« (Camilleri 2006: 2).

Joseph Camilleri, former chairman of Malta's National Commission for Persons with Disability explains how

The journey of Maltese people with impairments towards inclusion into the mainstream of economic and social life is a very recent occurrence. In fact, we only began to come out of the cellars, literally in some cases, as recently as forty years ago. (Camilleri 2006: 2)

He also recalls that

In the 1890's, the first well established charitable institutions opened their doors. They had a strong religious bias and focused almost exclusively on people with social problems with a moral regeneration. Between 1945 through the mid-1980's disabled people were regarded through the spectacles of a medical model [...]. (Camilleri 2006: 2)

The role of the Catholic Church in Malta was evidently of major significance in the development of the Maltese disability sector, raising awareness about the care and needs for people with disabilities, whilst establishing its first residential home facility for people with disabilities. In their co-edited account, Dr. Ann Marie Callus, Senior lecturer and acting Head of Disability Studies, Faculty of Wellbeing at the University of Malta and Camilleri (2001), point out that since its development in the 1940's to the present, the Maltese disability sector developed with the determination of the parents of people with a disability, through moral persuasion and

their own initiatives to set forth the agenda for the rightful services, equal opportunities and act as the driving force for the establishment of appropriate legal safeguards. Callus (2014) further explains how this development led for people with disabilities to be recognised in their own right. Even though this might be the case, the impact of the Catholic Church and its treatment and care for people with disability has left a permanent mark: »this influence is evident in the charitable views of disability that persist till this day with a staunch medicalised view alongside charity« (Azzopardi 2010: 23)¹.

In the present time, several disability organisations, health care services and facilities have been on the increase. This notwithstanding, the concept of advocating the integration of people with a disability within the arts is still in its early infancy. In the Maltese context, people with a learning disability are gradually being provided with opportunities and access to the arts and cultural sector. Whilst researching about dancing opportunities, training and performance for people with a learning disability, the available literature in this area is rather scarce. There is mention of two associations actively involved within the performing arts: *The Maltese Wheelchair Dance Sport Association* and *Opening Doors Association*.

Opening Doors Association is an autonomous, non-governmental and non-profit artistic voluntary organisation, established in 2011. *Opening Doors* was initiated in 2007 with the theatre group, created as part of an EU Grundtvig funded project, in partnership with Belgium and UK. The organisation thrives to make the performing arts accessible to young adults with a learning disability. The aim of the association is to provide the appropriate access for people with a learning disability to develop their artistic potential, in one or more of the following areas: theatre, dance and music. *Opening Doors* is currently made up of seven board members (volunteers), an Artistic Director, nine tutors (freelancers) and forty-five performers. The theatre group has been running for these past nine years, whereas the development of other artist genres developed recently, initiated through project funding, implementing both the dance group (ongoing since 2014) and music group (ongoing since 2015). A gradual improvement has also been observed in other artistic work within the communi-

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ty, taking place in day centres through own initiatives and collaborations between freelance dance, theatre and music practitioners/facilitators and professionals within the field of disability.

ADAPTIVE FACILITATION MODEL: A DANCE DEVISING FRAMEWORK

A dance devising process refers to the »acts of making and doing, of creating and performing, and of being an artist and/or interpreter« (Butterworth 2009: 189). The choreographic process explores facilitation as its primary method for the creation of movement material. The documentation of an innovative dance devising model is of major importance to this study, as it attempts to challenge past and present, existing negative conceptions of people with a learning disability, even more so, those who are interested in pursuing dance training and performance at a pre-professional level.

The analysis of the practical research conducted with *Opening Doors* dance collective, intends to conceptualise a framework that structures the dance devising process specific to *Opening Doors* dance collective. The practical research was spread over a period of six weeks in the form of movement workshops during the months of February and March 2016. Ten dance members, both male and female, ages ranging between nineteen to thirty-six formed part of the research, in which I took on the role of facilitator whilst encouraging the dance members to be active participants throughout the explorative process. Jacqueline Smith-Autard's (2002) teaching concepts and frameworks – the Midway Model and Jo Butterworth's (2009) Didactic-Democratic framework model are the theories guiding the analysis of the practical research.

Smith-Autard (2002) offers a theoretical and practical framework for the teaching of dance in education, known as the »art of dance model in education«. This is a valued teaching model which amalgamates features from the educational and professional models of teaching dance. The midway model finds a balance between the extreme concepts of the educational and professional models, yet its distinctiveness »lies in the concept of the art of dance in education contributing towards artistic education, aesthetic education and cultural education« (Smith-Autard 2002: 5). The model identifies three strands – that of creating, performing and apprecia-

ting dance. For the purpose of this work, Smith-Autard’s midway model acts as a springboard into gaining an in-depth insight into the practical research held with *Opening Doors* dance members. The midway model is a reference point which guided me to distinguish a differentiated approach that works for dance participants with a learning disability within the context of *Opening Doors*.

Educational	Midway		Professional
Process	Process + Product		Product
Creativity Imagination Individuality	Creativity Imagination Individuality	+ Knowledge of public artistic conventions	Knowledge of theatre dance repertoire
Feelings Subjectivity	Feelings Subjectivity	+ Skill + Objectivity	Skill acquired Objectivity
Principles	Principles	+ Techniques	Techniques
Open methods	Open	+ Closed	Closed methods
Creating	THREE STRANDS Composition Performance Appreciation OF DANCES leading to ARTISTIC EDUCATION AESTHETIC EDUCATION CULTURAL EDUCATION		Performing

(Smith-Autard, 2002: 27)

Table 1: Features of the art of dance in education model

The midway model features processes that would normally be taught in an educational setting. It draws features from both educational and professional models, placing prominence on composition, appreciation and dance performance. Smith-Autard (2002) makes reference to an educational and professional approach in order to come up with her distinctive model, showing in the centre column how both processes require equal emphasis. Features of her model are acknowledged in order to analyse the practical research, broadening the practice and purpose of several applicable features, which will be explained below.

Butterworth’s (2009) Didactic-Democratic spectrum model is a framework that proposes five incisive choreographic processes, which classify difference and distinctions between the choreographer’s and participant’s roles. The model is not rigid and does not proceed in a horizontal

progression, allowing the dance practitioner to shift from one process to another as required. Through Butterworth’s model a selection of processes were identified during practical devising process. The application of both Butterworth’s and Smith-Autard’s models will be explained through the analysis of the »adaptive facilitation model«.

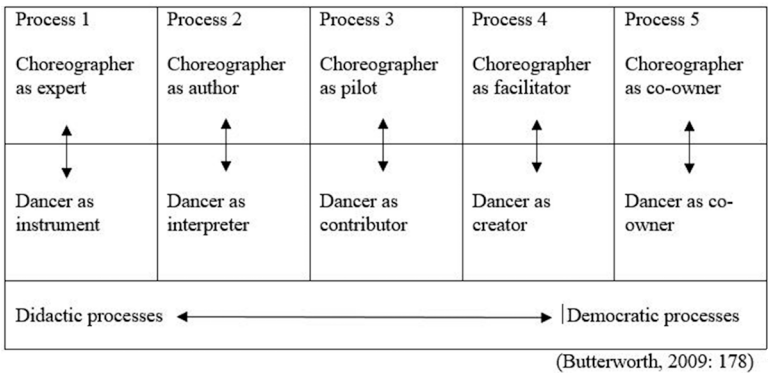


Table 2: Butterworth’s simple Didactic-Democratic Framework Model

ADAPTIVE FACILITATION MODEL

The »adaptive facilitation model« is presented as a dance devising framework for Opening Doors dance collective. The researched choreographic practice revolves around the needs of each individual within the group, their age, learning disability, physical needs and preferred learning style, whilst simultaneously addressing *Opening Doors*’ artistic goals. The »adaptive facilitation model« is not rigid in its form, rather it is a structure relevant for this present time, but flexible enough to be altered once again in the future, depending on the involvement of new participants within the group and possible subsequent modifications in the organisation’s goals. It acknowledges several factors such as; how the dance devising process is delivered, what learning styles are used, tools for differentiation and processes towards movement creation. The »adaptive facilitation model« can be applied to various settings – it is a model which can be utilized as a framework to devise choreographic work, whilst also being applicable in dance teaching settings. Below is the composition of the »adaptive facilitation model«, with a detailed explanation of each of its seven features.

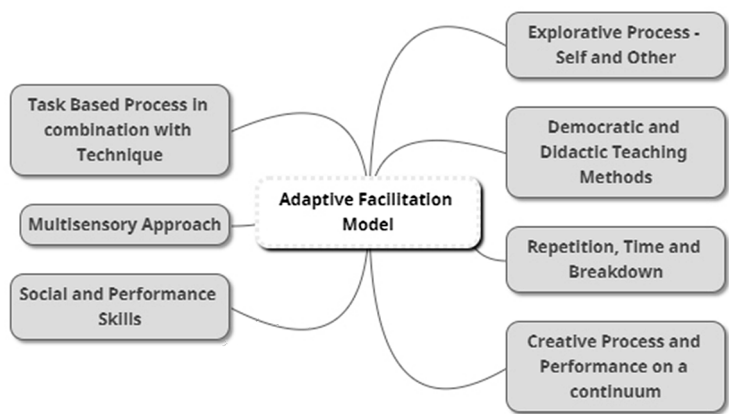


Table 3: Diagram featuring the seven features of the »adaptive facilitation model«

EXPLORATIVE PROCESS

The explorative process is a means by which the dance participant may engage in self-exploration. It may relate to a discovery phase, in which dance participants express themselves through movement, using their own innovative ways of moving. This allows for one to experience one’s own range of movement, which is significant for the individual as it is a time in which one may identify personal movement qualities or a significant style of moving. The dancers are also given the time and space to learn vicariously through observing and interacting with others. This is further explored when working in pairs or in a group, allowing for the development of working relationships, which may be further nourished with trust. Trust is an essential component in this process, often taken for granted in other dance settings. Dancers need to feel safe in their environment, whilst being encouraged to »open up« and share their dance experiences and explorations within the sessions. The development of trust allows for other skills to be learnt, including proximity, touch, sharing of weight and working and moving as a collective. This explorative process is essentially about communication, hence the exploration of body language through creative expression with the self, with others and with the guidance and engagement of the dance practitioner facilitating the process.



Table 4: Dancers engaged in the explorative process. Photo: Jeremy de Maria

TASK BASED PROCESS IN COMBINATION WITH TECHNIQUE

Rehearsals were based on given tasks or guided improvisations, allowing for the development and/or challenging the dancers' quality of movement vocabulary. This may equip the dancers with various skills, including observation of detail, the maintaining of focus, the ability to lead and follow, the creation of a relationship with space as well as the creation of relationships with others in space. Throughout the guided tasks, prompts or »what if« suggestions, identified by Larry Lavender (2009) were used, challenging dancers to make new discoveries, explorations, investigations whilst also broadening creativity and imagination. This style of prompting allows for the choreographer to make suggestions and possibilities without eliminating or altering the dancers' choices or obliging dancers to use any of the particular suggested outcomes (Lavender in Butterworth and Wielschut 2009: 77-79). Prompts are used to develop movement material, pushing the dancer to possibly explore further, build, add or elaborate on movement. The development of dance devising through prompts or suggestions is reached through the application of Rudolph Laban's movement analysis, making reference to the interrelation between body (what the body does), space (where the body moves), effort (how the body

performs movement) and relationship (relationships that occur in movement) (Smith-Autard 2010).

Laban's movement principles provide »a rich overview of the scope of movement possibilities« (Hackney 2002: 237). These features can be used for initiating, developing or for describing movement. Through the application of Laban's movement analysis dancers are encouraged to expand their range and quality of movement. The diagram below is a simplified version of Laban's analysis of movement, which covers each element in further detail, providing plausibility for unique ways to developing and combining movement in one's own unique way.

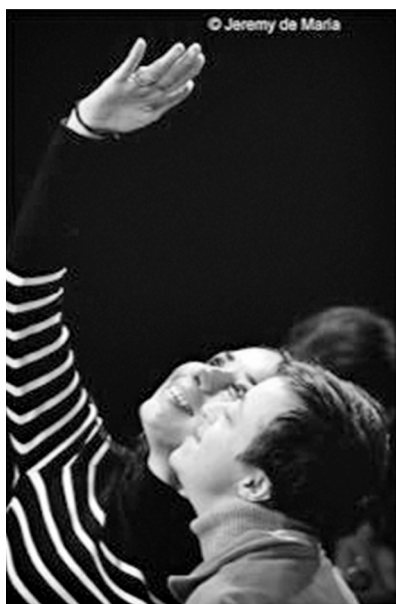


Table 5: Dancers working on a guided-task. Photo: Jeremy de Maria

Laban's principles act as a technique, presenting novel, possibly challenging discoveries, which in turn, can aid the dancers to elaborate their skill, strength and quality of body movement. Technique or technicality of certain movements is considered applicable as it serves purpose, it can be a strengthening tool as well as a method of injury prevention, and an essential element of the »know how« needed to move into and out of movement. Bailey Anderson states that »by teaching and choreographing in principles, all bodies can participate within their own range« (2015: 90). A combination of body movement research and the application of principles offers the possibility for *Opening Doors* dancers to create movement from their own interpretation and embodiment, allowing the dancers to be leaders in the shaping of their own bodies, whilst choosing to apply layers of new movement knowledge and techniques.

DEMOCRATIC AND DIDACTIC PRACTICE

Dance devising methods tend to vary according to the objectives of the dance practitioner leading the rehearsal process, whilst also keeping in mind the needs of the dancers. The movement tasks being presented also makes demands on which approach to facilitating the rehearsal process delivers best. Learning the key language of the dance participants is fundamental to begin with. Rehearsals with *Opening Doors* dance collective were based on a facilitation or guided process in which the dance practitioner usually suggests, shares and guides movement exploration in the form of set tasks, encouraging the development of creativity, imagination and individuality in dancers. Guided discovery and didactic practices are two teaching styles which were evident throughout the practical research. The teaching practice depends on the objective of the choreographic process, which altered from an explorative, guided method, to a more direct, instruction-based approach. For e.g. during the initial stages of the creative process a democratic approach is adopted, allowing the dancers to contribute to the artistic concept, whilst sharing ownership and responsibility of the dance creation. With reference to Hayden-Davies and Whitehead (2010) their definitions of teaching styles describe the role of both the teacher and learner.

Teaching Style	What is it?	Teacher's Role	Learner's Role	Relating to which learning style
Guided discovery/ problem solving – convergent discovery (one outcome)	Allows the learner to beyond the known. Teacher sets task with one outcome based on previously learnt knowledge. Learners find their own way to achieve the learning outcome.	Guiding	Investigating	Auditory Kinaesthetic
Command/ didactic/ demonstration	Teacher has all the knowledge, ideas and makes all the decisions – learners are passive.	Instructor	Observing and copying	Visual Kinaesthetic

Table 6: Hayden-Davies & Whitehead Teaching Styles (2010)

Process 3	Process 4	Process 1
Choreographer role: Choreographer as pilot	Choreographer as facilitator	Choreographer as expert
Dancer role: Dancer as contributor	Dancer as creator	Dancer as instrument
Choreographer skills: Initiate concept, able to direct, set and develop tasks through improvisation or imagery, shape the material that ensues.	Provide leadership, negotiate process, intention, concept. Contribute methods to provide stimulus, facilitate process from content generation to macro- structure.	Control of concept, style, content, structure and interpretation. Generation of all material.
Dancer skills: Divergent: replication, content development, content creation (improvisation and responding to tasks).	Divergent: content creation and development (improvisation and responding to tasks).	Convergent: imitation, replication.
Social interaction: Active participation from both parties, interpersonal relationship.	Generally interactive.	Passive but receptive, can be impersonal.
Teaching methods: Leading, guiding.	Nurturing, mentoring.	Authoritarian.
Learning approaches: Respond to tasks, contribute to guided discovery, replicate material from others etc.	Respond to tasks, problem-solve, contribute to guided-discovery, actively participate.	Conform, receive and process instruction.

(Butterworth, 2009: 187-188)

Table 7: Processes 3, 4 and 1 from Butterworth's Didactic-Democratic Framework Model

As represented by Hayden-Davies and Whitehead (2010), guided discovery involves accompanying dancers, making it possible for the investigation of given tasks. As movement is developed, towards the final stages of the devising process a tendency to shift to command style occurs, which structures and moulds movement content to a set choreography. The following processes from Butterworth's Didactic-Democratic model shown above, are identified, listed in a chronological order of how and in what phase of the *Opening Doors* dance devising process these three processes took form:

- Process 3: dancers contributing to the choreographers' concept
- Process 4: dancers collaborating together with the choreographer
- Process 1: dancers as instrument following the direction of the choreographer

The starting point of the dance devising process is clearly a collaborative process – process 3, choreographer as pilot and dancer as contributor. Towards midway of the rehearsal process, process 4 – choreographer as facilitator and dancer as creator ensues, where dancers are actively involved in the creation of the content material. The first two processes described include a democratic approach, where dance devising processes are interactive and collaborative, encouraging dancers to share their ideas. A more didactic approach is usually adopted towards the completion of the rehearsal process moving towards performance, whilst still attempting to maintain a democratic direction with explanations following decisions taken. This takes us to Process 1, towards a more didactic method, where responsibility is placed on the dance practitioner as the choreography is finalised. A didactic approach is rather necessary at this stage since the organisation of the performance must be formed in order to be performed, as it gathers all the scattered pieces of the choreographic process, adopting ideas over others, placing the work in an orderly structure, thus moving away from chaos. A collaborative approach allows for both dancers and dance practitioner to work together, allowing ideas and imaginative responses to occur. Such an approach can be described as a two-way learning process, where both dancers and the dance practitioner learn from each other.

MULTISENSORY APPROACH

The application of a multisensory approach allows for the stimulation of all the senses, ideal for dancers who have different learning needs and styles. Learning is mostly experienced through physical activity, thus becoming hands-on learning through the use of role play, objects, props, textures, visuals, demonstration and sound effects. Fleming's (2006) VARK learning theory identifies various learning styles which can be incorporated within the presentation of tasks, including visual, aural, read/write, kinaesthetic and multimodal. VARK's theory of instructional preferences focuses on different ways information is processed (in Sanders 2013: 20). Placing yourself in the learners' position can be a helpful strategy to incorporate new ways of planning and delivering a dance devising task. Using a variety of learning approaches enables dancers to fully comprehend what is expected of them, whilst also awakening and instigating the use of other senses. Various approaches are also required in certain instances. For e.g. visuals teamed with aural learning seem to further support the choreographic concept and its intention. A kinaesthetic approach is also essential, aiding dancers to learn from demonstrations, through reciprocal learning. Dancers are inspired by other dancers during improvised tasks, making choices to borrow, copy, select or expand on the movement they see around them to make it their own.

REPETITION, TIME, BREAKDOWN AND DIFFERENTIATION

Repetition and breakdown are significant processes within the dance devising process as they allow time for dancers to embody and engage in movement. This way, dancers are given the time and space to understand the process of movement, its intention and overall purpose. Repetition can serve dancers to remember movement or a movement phrase, allowing for the development of a sense of articulation and a focus on the detail. It can also be another strategy of finding innovative ways of moving into and out of movement or exploring a movement task further. Repetition does not take on the same meaning as »practice makes perfect« – an approach used highly in professional dance settings, it is rather based on the reliance of having to investigate a movement further, possibly referring to a build up approach. Breakdown of a technical skill also allows for further

exploration, which could include finding alternative ways and means of entering, experiencing and leaving movement. Breaking down tasks is a strategy which dancers can find helpful in the building of their work and processing information. The breakdown of tasks offers clear differentiation opportunities, supporting each dancer's learning. Several approaches to differentiation analysed include:

- By outcome – the same task is set for all; it is flexible and can be interpreted in different ways to allow students to work at their own level and produce a range of outcomes.
- By pace – students cover the same content and at the same level, but take whatever time they need to complete it. (adapted from Stradling 1991 in Sanders 2013: 63)

Differentiation is finding alternative ways to a set outcome, suiting individual needs and profiles, acknowledging individuality and difference in learning, thus allowing for the practice to be inclusive in a way that can be accessed by all dancers. Christina Kostoula, an inclusive arts practitioner, explains how in inclusive practice we need to consider:

The deeper syntax of movement, breaking it down for the student, through an internal understanding of the intention behind the movement.

- How students can be facilitated to identify ways to adapt movement to their needs whilst retaining the core aims of the exercise
- How to know/question what we are trying to achieve (making meaning through dance) rather than imposing a certain know-how on people.
- How to identify the core principles of our chosen technique (elements which identify or define a codified style/technique) and be prepared to translate them. (Kostoula in Sanders 2013: 80)

Differentiation relies on Kostoulas' understanding of inclusive practice within dance devising processes. The adaptive facilitation model recognises most of the latter concepts, identifying the experience of dance movement through an embodied approach, where meaning and intention are crucial elements for physical and mental responses. This is further enhanced through a multifaceted approach to delivering and engaging in the choreographic process.

SOCIAL AND PERFORMANCE SKILLS

Commitment and respect towards dancers as well as the facilitator/dance practitioner, are essential elements within the dance collective. Apart from engaging within the dance devising process, dancers are constantly learning how to interact respectfully with one another. The latter social skills are eminent throughout the development of the choreographic process, as dancers get the opportunity to work and engage in movement together. The development of the following interpersonal skills, which are necessary dance performance skills, mutually grow through the embodied experience of the devising process. Such skills might include the development of trust and cooperation, awareness of proximity and boundaries, physical contact, awareness of touch and its quality, being able to listen to others, both verbally and through the body. The development of social skills can be assisted through the facilitation of the choreographic process, which can be referred to as the learning context. Dancers and dance practitioners play an active role in the learning process, as explained through Vygotsky's (1978) theory on social development (Sanders 2013). Vygotsky emphasises how social influences structures learning, thus the shift in roles, where the dance practitioner learns from the dancer and the dancers learn from each other, can construct, assist and guide the transmission of both dance performance and social skills. Performance skills include the acquisition of good knowledge of presence, whether on stage whilst performing, or during the choreographic process/rehearsal. This involves moving beyond the body's extremities, moving with personal confidence, engaging in eye contact when necessary and moving on? a clear pathway. Owning the space and developing spatial awareness whilst moving alone or with others exposes an understanding and responsibility of purpose and intention. Being aware of transitions of movements and transitioning from one destination to another are amongst the artistic skills that are explored and acquired within the creative process of devising choreography.

CREATING AND PERFORMANCE ON A CONTINUUM

The process of creation and dance development is a work in progress, further refined towards the preparation for the performance, which we know to be the end product. Both processes of creating and performing work on

a continuum with one another, with one process continuously referring to the other. Artistic development is acquired through the creative process of learning and further explored through rehearsal and performance. These two processes are not necessarily distinct or separate, but one process feeds the other, making this a maturing and growing artistic process for the dancers. This approach motivates the dancer's creativity, preparation, stamina, thus challenging the dancers to explore the dance concept in more depth. Every performance is an opportunity to re-experience and discover new qualities of expression. Re-visiting a work through rehearsal and performance is a chance to express and explore new options and decisions, adding layer upon layer of information and artistic attribution to the choreographic concept.

The described features above are a synthesis of a gathered process which can be described as a framework or tool to dance devising for *Opening doors* dance members. The adaptive facilitation model takes on a holistic perspective to the art of dance, giving dancers the opportunity to experience Smith-Autard's (2002) three processes of the art of dance: creating, performing and appreciating dance. Its flexibility and adaptability allow the model to be modified and utilised within diverse dance settings and dance groups. The model is identified through its collaborative dance approach, allowing dancers with a learning disability to create and share ownership of the making and creating of choreography. The model encourages dancers to be actively involved in the artistic process, emphasising the voice of the dancer.

Such an interactive approach proves to challenge perceptions of learning disabilities, by focusing on the strengths, abilities and possibilities of the individual, rather than identifying the disability or the difficulty. This framework attempts to highlight the dancer's potential, whilst questioning approaches that work best and are suited for the dancers, allowing for the construction of a new body of knowledge. In view of this research, which has been based on one specific group; *Opening Doors* dance collective, the model takes into account how it serves the dancers, through enhancing their potential, creativity and ability. It can also be said that the dancers also serve the model as their contribution clarifies the several misconceptions on people with a learning disability, by bringing to light the personal, specific and originality of each dancer involved within this process. Such an approach can therefore be said to be unlimited to a specific category of dancers, with or without a learning disability.

This research attempts to provide awareness on the needs of young adults with a learning disability in Malta – acknowledging the fact that these young adults have the right to fulfil their aspirations, talents and personal goals. The research also creates awareness of *Opening Doors Association*, one of Malta's few organisations providing an artistic space for people with a learning disability to develop their skills as artists.

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