

THE ORGANISATION OF A DISTANCE POSTGRADUATE DANCE PROGRAMME AND THE PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS SPECIALISING IN DANCE

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ABSTRACT

Researching student participation in distance postgraduate programmes of studies in dance constitutes a concern of any educational organisation. This sort of participation can be considered as a type of "behaviour" of the students which has to be researched and defined.

The aim of this study is to research the factors which constitute the behaviour of students participating in distance postgraduate programmes of studies in dance and to detect any difference in their behaviour that stems from characteristics such as gender and previous dance experience.

The sample of the study consisted of 71 male and female students who had chosen to specialise in Greek traditional dance in three Departments of Physical Education of Greece, where the specific specialisation is offered. From the results of the study, it is observed that there is a moderately positive tendency to participate in a postgraduate programme of studies in dance. Furthermore, it was found that male and female students in the three departments did not show any difference in their "behaviour". Differences in "Role Identity" and "Attitude Strength" can be seen between those who had previous dance experience and those who did not.

Keywords: Dance, postgraduate studies, participation, organisation

INTRODUCTION

The changes occurring in Greece in the last decades of the previous century at an economic, social and technological level led to the emergence, development and establishment of distance learning, at least at the higher level education. The 1980s also saw the development of dance studies in Greece. The combination of these two elements meant that a distance-learning postgraduate dance study programme could be organised and realised. However, in such a case it is deemed necessary to investigate and determine the participation of students.

More particularly, student participation in postgraduate dance programmes can be considered a type of "behaviour" which requires investigation and definition. The purpose of this research is to investigate the factors which influence student participation in a distance-learning postgraduate dance study programme and to cast light on the extent to which student "behaviour" is influenced by features such as sex and previous dance experience.

For the above purpose, both distance-learning and dance studies in Greece are examined, Planned Behaviour Theory is analysed and the data of empirical research conducted for this purpose are presented. More specifically, the sample of the research consisted of 71 students, of both sexes, who specialised in dance in three Greek departments of Physical Education and Sport Science which offer the particular specialisation.

The results showed that there is a moderately positive student tendency to participate in a postgraduate dance programme. It was also shown that, in terms of gender, students exhibited no difference in their "behaviour". Differences were only observed between those who had previous experience in dance and the group that did not, in terms of the Planned Behaviour factors of "Role Identity" and "Attitude Strength".

DISTANCE LEARNING

The changes which occurred in the late twentieth century led to the development of distance learning. The concept of distance learning "includes various forms of study of all levels which are conducted without the direct and constant supervision of teaching staff present in classrooms with students, but which benefit from the organisation, guidance and teaching provided by an educational institution" (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004; Holmberg, 1977; Matralis, 1998 b)

The particular teaching methodology offers the student direct control over the place, time and pace of studies depending on his financial, professional, social and family obligations (Lionarakis & Lykouriotis, 1998; Shearer, 2003). Physical presence of the student is not required in distance learning.

The tutor, while being at a distance, provides the student with guidance and immediate, effective and individualized assistance when needed. Dependence of the student on the education material is higher than in traditional education systems; therefore, education materials for distance learning are specially designed in order to maximise effective learning with the least amount of help. During the education process, new technologies are implemented both in communication and in the presentation of the education material.

The quality of distance learning is contingent on the quality of the education material and communication. Systematic support to the student is effected through the special education material which becomes available to him as well as through communication with the tutor, the purpose of whom is to provide encouragement, understanding of the task, clarification and assessment of the student's work (Matralis, 1998 b; Sherry, 2003). The majority of students will, at some point, require the human assistance of the tutor, regardless of the adequacy of the educational material (Matralis, 1998 a).

The tutor's role is to guide the students through the subject and organise the learning process. The tutor is the creator of conditions which facilitate and accelerate learning and not the source of the knowledge (Kokkos, 1999).

Very often, distance learning becomes a useful "tool" in the hands of those who plot education policies in order to increase access to the various levels of education. In educationally advanced countries which have been utilising distance learning for decades, the connection between the two is immediate.

In 2000, in Texas USA, the target was set to achieve a 50% increase in the number of students in higher education by the year 2015 by making use of the potential distance learning offers. For this purpose, education programmes, costs, workshops and total project design were assessed and evaluated (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2000).

Askon, Johnston, Petty and Young (2003) examined the challenges, methods and benefits associated with the expansion of adult access to education programmes via on-line distance learning. Wider access to education does not only concern higher education but teacher training for the other two levels of education as well. Professional training constitutes an important factor of education upgrading. According to Michailidis (2000), a basic methodological tool is distance learning with the use of internet as it offers advantages in comparison to other forms of training.

DANCE STUDIES IN GREECE

The study of dance in Greece was, in a large part, neglected. One of the main reasons was the distinction between art and science which excluded art from the benefit of a scientific approach. This distinction in conjunction with the fact that dance lasts as long as its execution contributed to a non-scientific study of dance.

The 1980s saw major shifts in the study of dance in Greece. A pivotal point in these changes was the upgrading of Physical Education and Sport Science departments to the higher education level; the significance of this lies in that Greek traditional dance was taught in these institutions as a subject for the training of students (Serbezis, 1995).

In Greece, the potential of establishing studies on forms of dance other than traditional is still limited. Lack of university level studies is more than apparent; however, the gap is partially filled by the curriculum provided by the State School of Orchestral Art and private dance schools. The Department of Physical Education of Athens has made an effort to establish a postgraduate study programme of dance. Within the context of the postgraduate study programme "Physical Education and Sport" offered to students since 1996, has included the subject "Folklore-Anthropology of Dance". Thus, students opting for the particular subject attend, among other courses, a series of lessons oriented towards the study of dance.

The Department of Physical Education of the Democritus University of Thrace in collaboration with the Department of Physical Education of the University of Thessaly elaborated a new postgraduate study programme within the context of which provision has been made for the creation of an independent direction on the object of dance (<http://www.phyed.duth.gr/gr/20years/default.aspx#>).

However, it remains inactive to the present day. To complete their studies, students follow a hybrid model of studies according to which intensive courses administered in the traditional teaching method alternate with distance learning teaching methods. In the implementation of the latter, emphasis is placed on the use of new technologies in support of synchronous and asynchronous forms of teaching.

Thus, distance courses rely more on technological achievements and less on the elaboration of educational materials suited for distance learning.

DISTANCE LEARNING AND DANCE

The implementation of new education forms, such as distance learning, and new technologies creates a great potential for the study of dance. Indeed, there have been several successful attempts to connect the theoretical kinetic skill framework with distance learning teaching methods. However, considerable difficulty is encountered in integrating distance learning with the learning of kinetic skills due to the nature of dance and the increased requirements for personal guidance of the trainee.

The studies of Koutsouba (2001; 2006) are of particular interest as they examine the applicability of a distance learning dance study programme. Dance is approached as a kinetic skill which can be taught from a distance with the use of new technologies. The model proposed not only encompasses the theoretical pursuit of dance but also the learning of kinetic skills.

Hybrid education models combining education methods with various forms provide the capacity of learning physical activities and, naturally, these may include dance as well. The combination of the above methodologies and formats within a notation system (specifically Labanotation, which accurately represents the phases and flow of the dance movement) constitutes an alternative for the study and learning of dance. Thus, printed teaching material may be created which, in combination with the multi forms of the teaching material, may lead to a self-adequate distance learning of dance. Therefore, the new educational approaches enhance the potential of dance programmes for attendance by larger population groups.

THE PLANNED BEHAVIOUR THEORY

Investigation into student participation in distance postgraduate dance programmes must constitute an important provision of any educational institution. Access to educational programmes via distance learning is not exclusively connected or determined by social and economic factors. There are also psychological factors to be considered which strongly influence the student's decision to participate in such programmes.

Participation in distance postgraduate programmes can be considered a type of student "behaviour" which requires investigation in order to examine its defining variables. This approach will be achieved with the assistance of the Planned Behaviour Theory. The theory is founded in the idea that an individual's actions follow a logical sequence based upon the available information (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). This theory seems to predict behaviour quite satisfactorily (Tesser & Shaffer, 1990; Theodorakis, 1992).

The component elements of a given behaviour are four: the act, the purpose of the act, the duration of the act and the place-frame where the act occurs (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Theodorakis, 1992); for example, a person who dances (act) for a dance club (purpose) for the next few months (duration) at the dance hall (place-frame). A necessary requirement in order to give answers to questions of the type "Why are some people dancing?" or "Why do some prefer dancing to swimming?" is that the questions should not concern a general type of behaviour but a specific act each time (Theodorakis, 1992).

The prediction of behaviour according to the Planned Behaviour Theory is related to the variables of "Intention", "Attitudes toward Behaviour", "Subjective Norms", "Perceived Behaviour Control", "Attitude Strength" and "Role Identity" (Bebetsos, 1999; Theodorakis, 1994; Theodorakis, Bagiatis & Goudas, 1995).

One's "Intention" to act precedes behaviour (Bebetsos, 1999). "Intention" expresses a person's readiness to perform a given behaviour. Strong intention means that the individual will try to perform the behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The correct expression of intention can predict behaviour since behaviour is determined by intention. "Behaviour Intention" is the possibility of performing a behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Theodorakis, 1992).

The "planning" of a future behaviour is reflected by the intention (Bagozzi, 1989). The exact determination of the intention is necessary. There is a difference between a general expression such as in "I intend to attend the lessons and the dance club" and a specific as in "I intend to attend the dance lesson on Sunday morning at 11" (Theodorakis, 1992).

There are various definitions which attempt to describe the concept of "Attitude". According to Sarnoff (1960), it is "the bias towards a positive or negative reaction to an object" while Fishbein & Eizen (1975) define it as "is the degree to which performance of the behavior is positively or negatively valued". "Attitude" expresses one's positive or negative disposition towards behaviour. For example, participating in dance activities is good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant (Theodorakis, 1992).

The term "Attitude Strength" encompasses a number of ideas which are considered one entity. The concepts of confidence, self-confidence, importance, centrality, skilfulness, certainty, knowledge and more, compose the term, which expresses the strength of attitudes and intention exhibited by individuals (Theodorakis, 1992). Liska (1984) makes reference to the creation of the variable "Strength of Attitudes" in which he includes variables such as "confidence", "centrality" and "intensity". The term indicates the degree of an individual's certainty to perform a particular behaviour (Bebetsos, 1999). Raden (1985) describes the variables influencing the relationship between attitude and behaviour and expresses the view that strong attitudes are more closely related to behaviour (Theodorakis, 1992)

"Role Identity" indicates that the individual acts in a certain manner because he considers this manner of action a part of his identity and role in society (Theodorakis, 1992). The term refers to an individual's perceptions of his ability to perform a given behaviour. "Role Identity" is influenced by the individual's attitude strength but influences intention (Bebetsos, 1999).

The importance of "Role Identity" centres on the fact that an individual's identity is more stable than his intention to act. The capacity of the "Planned Behaviour Theory" to predict behaviour increases with the use of the concept of identity and the latter contributes to the prediction of repetitive behaviours (Charng, Piliavin & Callero, 1988; Theodorakis, 1992).

The relationship between identity and behaviour is of particular interest. The more important an individual perceives his identity to be, the higher the possibility that he will behave according to this identity and his role. Research has shown the significance of "Role Identity" in behaviour prediction (Callero, Howard & Piliavin, 1987; Biddle, Bank & Slavings, 1987).

PLANNED BEHAVIOUR THEORY, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Earlier research investigated the determination of students specialising in traditional dance at the departments of Physical Education of Greece to participate in postgraduate dance programmes. The research involved 133 students specialising in dance at the departments of Physical Education of Komotini, Athens, Serres, Thessalonica and Trikala. Data collection was achieved through written questionnaires which were distributed to the above departments. The analysis revealed differences among the departments of Physical Education in terms of their students' determination to participate in postgraduate study programmes. It was found that the students of Komotini were less determined/motivated to participate in contrast to the students of Thessaly and Serres. Additionally, a clear tendency towards postgraduate studies in dance was recorded with increased intention of participation (Goulimaris, Serbezis, Pitsiakou and Pavlidou, 2002).

Research in the subject of traditional dance which was conducted in 2003 examined the factors influencing the participation of traditional dancers in organized dance activities. The aim of the research was to investigate the intention, attitude and behavioural beliefs of Greek traditional dancers. The research sample consisted of 129 dancers who participated in organised dance classes for at least the previous 5 years. The analysis showed that the age factor did not influence attitude and behaviour beliefs while it did influence the individuals' intention to participate in dance activities. Also, the origin factor appeared to affect only the individuals' beliefs. In general, the results provided important information on the relationship between age-origin and intention, attitudes and individual beliefs as well as their participation in organised dance activities (Papageorgiou, Goulimaris and Serbezis, 2003). Theodorakis (1994) examined the predictability of participation in a two-month exercise programme.

The "Planned Behaviour Theory" proved to be able to help and increase the accuracy of the prediction. It was also revealed that the beliefs of the participants influence their participation in the exercise programme. The theory became more effective in predicting participation when the variables "Attitude Strength" and "Role Identity" were involved in the analysis.

In their research, Bebetos, Antoniou, Kouli and Trikas (2004) investigated the contribution of knowledge and information in the process of predicting student intention to play badminton after attending the corresponding course for a semester. Result analysis documented the reliability of the 'Planned Behaviour Theory' in the prediction of intention.

The results showed that the total amount of information and available knowledge on certain behaviour would be a critical component in attaining agreement between behaviour and act.

The contribution of knowledge and information in the prediction of intention was the same before and after conducting the course. It was proved that systematic access to information and knowledge appears to be accompanied by a greater intent on participation. Distance learning has not yet been researched in conjunction with all the variables provided under the Planned Behaviour Theory. The vast majority of research available in international literature makes reference to attitudes. In the last decade, this body of research can be distinguished into that which examines teacher or tutor/trainer attitudes (O'Quinn, 2002; Uzunboyly, 2007; Yu-Hui, Chu-Chen, 2008) and research which focuses on student or trainee attitudes (Annetta, et.al. 2008; Beyth-Marom, R. Et. al 2005; Koohang, 2004; Mabrito, 2006; Stevens, & Switzer, 2006; Welker, & Berardino, 2006). The above highlight the importance of a research investigating the number of variables provided by the "Planned Behaviour Theory" in conjunction with the development of a distance learning programme.

PURPOSE and HYPOTHESES of RESEARCH

The purpose of the present research is twofold: initially, the evaluation of the factors composing the "behaviour" of Physical Education students specializing in dance in an organised postgraduate dance programme through distance learning and secondly, the extent to which the above factors are differentiated due to characteristics such as gender and previous dance experience. The research hypotheses of this study are that participation - as determined by the factors "Intention", "Attitude", "Role Identity" and "Attitude Strength" - of students specializing in dance at the departments of Physical Education of Greece in an organised distance postgraduate dance programme is positive. The above variables are not influenced by the gender of the participants but by their previous dance experience.

METHOD

Sample

The sample consisted of 71 students of both genders who specialised in Greek traditional dance. The sample was derived from three departments of Physical Education and Sport Science, particularly Athens, Konotini and Serres, where the option of the above specialisation is provided. The selection of departments and students was random. The number of students per department and their demographic characteristics appear in Table: 1.

Table: 1
Demographic characteristics of the sample

<i>Department</i>	<i>No of Students</i>	<i>Gender (%)</i>		<i>Age (M)</i>	<i>Experience (%)</i>	
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>		<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>Komotini</i>	30	24,1	75,9	21	83,3	16,7
<i>Athens</i>	28	18,5	81,5	21,5	88,9	11,1
<i>Serres</i>	13	30,8	69,2	21	76,9	23,1
Total	71	24,5	75,5	21,2	83	17

Data collection

The method of the self-completed questionnaire was chosen to compile the views of the students specialising in Greek traditional dance. The Planned Behaviour questionnaire was used to collect data, which has been used again in Greek research and has produced satisfactory levels of reliability and validity (Bebetsos, 1999). After adaptation to the specific requirements of the present study, the questionnaire was submitted on a pilot-basis to 25 students of Greek traditional dance for purposes of clarification, extension, elimination of obscure words and better wording. Every question was modelled according to the 7-point Likert scale. The questionnaires were distributed at the lecture rooms of the speciality just before the commencement of the lecture. The questionnaires were filled in under the supervision of the researchers or course directors, a procedure which lasted between 10 and 15 minutes.

The questionnaire consisted of five sections amounting to a total of 23 questions. The participation of students in a postgraduate dance programme via distance learning concerns the following academic year.

The first section of the questionnaire queries the demographic characteristics of the students and in particular, the gender, age and previous dance experience. The second section consists of five question items examining student attitude towards participation in distance postgraduate dance programmes. The third section - three question items – investigates student intention to participate in such programme. The next section – four questions – focuses on student "Role Identity". Finally, the fifth section, composed of eight questions, investigates student "Attitude Strength".

RESULTS

Questionnaire reliability

Reliability analysis was performed in order to examine the consistency, and therefore reliability, of the items constituting the four factors under study. The reliability test was based on the calculation of Cronbach's alpha. Reliability analysis results pertaining to "Attitude", "Intention", "Role Identity" and "Attitude Strength" are shown in Table: 2, where it can be seen that the reliability for these factors ($\alpha=.86$, $\alpha=.84$, $\alpha=.89$ and $\alpha=.93$ respectively) is satisfactory. All items contribute positively to the improvement of factors reliability.

Table: 2
Factors' reliability analysis

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Alpha if item deleted</i>	<i>Alpha</i>
1 st Attitude	For me, regular participation* is good	.80	.86
	For me, regular participation is meaningless	.80	
	For me, regular participation is healthy	.85	
	For me, regular participation is useful	.82	
	For me, regular participation is unpleasant	.83	
2 nd Intention	I intend to participate regularly71	.84
	I am determined to participate regularly ...	.69
	I will try to participate regularly ...	.83
3 rd Role Identity	I consider myself able to participate88	.89
	I consider myself a person who will participate regularly ...	.88
	It is in my character to participate regularly ...	.84

	Generally, I am the type of person who will participate regularly ...	.82	
4 th Attitude Strength	It is certain that you will participate regularly ...	.92	.93
	It is right the opinion to participate regularly ...	.91	
	I feel sure that I will participate regularly ...	.92	
	It is important for you personally to participate regularly ...	.92	
	How much are you interested in participating regularly ...	.92	
	For me, regular participation is ...	.93	
	With the knowledge I have, I think I must participate regularly ...	.93	
	You find it interesting to participate regularly ...	.92	

- The participation of students in a postgraduate dance programme via distance learning concerns the following academic year.

Descriptive statistic

Four new variables were created which represent the four factors of the Planned Behaviour Theory. In particular, the new variables were "Attitude", "Intention", "Role Identity" and "Attitude Strength", derived from the added score of the questions for each factor divided by the number of question items in each factor.

Table: 3 shows the means for the four new variables.

Table: 3
Means of the four variables of the Planned Behaviour Theory

		<i>Factors</i>	
<i>Attitude</i>	<i>Intention</i>	<i>Role Identity</i>	<i>Attitude Strength</i>
5,37	3,35	4,02	3,97

For students specialising in dance in the departments of Physical Education, "Attitude" is satisfactorily positive, "Attitude Strength" and "Role Identity" are moderately positive while "Intention" of participating in a distance postgraduate dance programme is below average.

Gender differences

Four T-tests for independent samples were performed in order to investigate any existing statistically significant differences between male and female students in terms of "Attitude", "Intention", "Role Identity" and "Attitude Strength". According to the results shown in Table: 4, no statistically significant differences are observed.

Table: 4
Differences between male and female students in respect to the 4 factors

<i>Factors</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Attitude	56	2,43	.72
Intention	67	1,23	.17
Role Identity	67	0,69	.71
Attitude Strength	67	0,01	.80

* $p < .05$

It is observed that there is no difference in the evaluation of these four Planned Behaviour Theory factors between male and female students.

Differences Related To Previous Dance Experience

Four T-tests for independent samples were performed in order to investigate any statistically significant differences between students with prior dance experience and those without, with reference to the four factors. According to the results in Table: 5, significant differences exist between the two aforementioned student groups in terms of "Role Identity" and "Attitude Strength".

Table: 5
Differences between students with and without prior dance experience in respect to the four factors

<i>Factors</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Attitude	55	0,01	.92
Intention	68	0,13	.07
Role Identity	68	0,18	.00*
Attitude Strength	68	0,10	.01*

* $p < .05$

Table: 6 displays the means for "Role Identity" and "Attitude Strength", for which differences were observed.

Table: 6
Means for the factors "Role Identity" and "Attitude Strength"

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Experience</i>	<i>M</i>
Role Identity	Yes	4,2
	No	2,6
Attitude Strength	Yes	4,1
	No	2,9

Students from all three departments of Physical Education, depending on their prior dance experience evaluate "Role Identity" and "Attitude Strength" differently. More particularly, those with previous dance experience exhibit a higher mean in the above two factors.

CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation of overall student "behaviour" in the departments of Physical Education is that there is a moderately positive tendency for participation in postgraduate dance programme via distance learning. This concurs with results of earlier relevant research (Goulimaris, Serbezis, Pitsiakou & Pavlidou, 2002). More particularly, student's predisposition towards the referred postgraduate study programme (Attitude) was found to be high (M 5,37). Perception of students' ability to follow the programme (Role Identity), and their confidence that they would follow the programme (Attitude Strength) was found to be moderate (M 4,02 & 3,97 respectively).

The possibility of following the programme (Intention) was revealed to be lower than the other factors, at a mean of 3,35.

Positive predisposition, confidence and the ability students perceive they have create a positive "climate" for participation in a distance postgraduate dance programme albeit to a lesser degree. Therefore, designers of such programmes should strengthen the above behavioural factors.

The positive tendency students have towards participation constitutes an important finding of this research as it confirms a gradual shift in attitude and maturation of the manner in which students of the higher level of education perceive distance learning.

In evaluating this shift, one must take into consideration the increased degree of difficulty stemming from the practical nature of dance studies, which raises the issue of adapting the subject of dance to the requirements of the distance learning format.

In other words, educational material suitable for the purposes of distance learning must be created and the organization of studies should be such that obstacles pertinent to the "practical nature" of the subject are overcome. Very often, students fail to understand how it is possible to follow a distance postgraduate programme on a subject that involves intensive practical exercise.

The lower student "Intention" for participation in a distance postgraduate dance programme can be attributed to a series of reasons. One such reason is insufficient information and knowledge on the potential of distance learning and what a postgraduate dance programme can offer. In a competitive society, the acquisition of knowledge and qualifications certainly gives a comparative advantage to the recipient of this knowledge.

According to the results, no difference due to gender exists among the examined factors. Regarding the relationship between dance and the two sexes, a fact is that the general perception of dance perpetuates the notion that dance is more of a "woman's thing", meaning that it suits the female idiosyncrasy and character more than the male. However, this idea is not confirmed in the present research, which is not a totally unexpected finding as the research sample was composed of students of Physical Education specialising in dance.

Nevertheless, it is encouraging to verify that this perception of dance is becoming outmoded, mainly among the people who comprise the future of dance. One of the aims of the study was to investigate the manner in which student "behaviour" is differentiated influenced by previous dance experience. The results show that, overall, there are differences between students with prior dance experience and those without in terms of confidence (Role Identity) and ability (Attitude Strength) to follow distance postgraduate programmes. More particularly, those with previous dance experience feel more confident (M 4,1) and more able (M 4,2) to participate.

This finding proves that familiarisation with the subject and educational procedures of dance as well as increased dance ability stemming from experience contribute to the feeling of confidence and ability, and therefore tendency, students have to participate in a distance postgraduate dance programme.

In conclusion, distance learning is required and is able to provide for modern educational needs deriving from changes in economic, social and technological conditions, to which traditional education systems fail to respond.

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