



Article

# Exploring the embodied subtleties of collaborative creativity: What organisations can learn from dance

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## Abstract

This study illustrates the value of embodied subtleties in the process of collaborative creativity. Drawing on a sensory ethnography of two dance productions, we illustrate the fine-grained ways in which professional dancers negotiate creative processes behind the scenes. We identify three aspects through which collaborative creativity emerges from bodily subtleties: (1) moving beyond individual bodies towards collective ambitions, (2) relating to colleagues' micro-gestures and bodily nuances, and (3) the role of 'serious play' between bodies in setting the scene for the first two aspects to occur. The findings will contribute to our understanding of the practice of collaborative creativity, which we treat as not only a mental but also a highly intimate bodily practice. We conclude that appreciating sensory micro-dynamics between oneself and one's colleagues is crucial for creative collaboration, which is increasingly necessary for management learning in contemporary organisations.

## Keywords

Body, collaborative creativity, embodied subtleties, micro-gestures, professional dance, sensory ethnography

## Introduction

Due to the speed and unpredictability of change in contemporary organisational environments, creativity has become a sought after capability (Conor et al., 2015). Organisations, groups and

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individuals are constantly faced with situations that require creativity, complex problem-solving and innovativeness, and the expectations for new ideas, products and processes are constantly increasing (Bilton and Cummings, 2014). In much of the literature on management and organisation studies, creativity is defined as a new and useful, valuable or appropriate product, process or idea (Amabile, 1996; Woodman et al., 1993). In this study, however, we view creativity as ‘engagement in creative acts, regardless of whether the resultant outcomes are novel, useful, or creative’ (Drazin et al., 1999: 287).

We base this study on the notion that collaborative creativity is a collective social phenomenon that emerges from the constant negotiation of meanings, ideas and interpretations of one another in *bodily* ways (Koivunen and Wennes, 2011; Ryömä and Satama, 2019), that is, in ways that highlight sensuous, empathetic and reflexive ways of being in the world in relation to others. We see collaborative creativity not as a linear, neat process with an end result that motivates work, but a messy, complex and embodied process in which ideas arise by listening, sensing and empathising with the subtle gestures and movements of others’ bodies (Stierand et al., 2017).

Embodiment is a topic that is largely missing from the mainstream research on creativity. For example, of the 24 chapters in the *Handbook of Creativity* (Sternberg, 1998), none explicitly address the embodied, fine-grained qualities of the creative process or ground creative acts within the body and senses. We argue that addressing embodiment is necessary and useful for both organisational scholars and managers, given recent shifts toward more fluid, boundaryless and ambiguous working practices. Self-managing teams have been emphasised over formal hierarchies (Druskat and Wheeler, 2003) and technological developments have led collaborative work to become increasingly *disembodied* as virtual means of work have grown common. At the time of writing, we have just witnessed an explosion in the use of virtual working due to the Covid-19 global pandemic meaning our findings are particularly apposite at this time. We suggest that (re) emphasising the body in collaborative creative work will equip researchers with ways to better understand the subtle nuances of the new organisational milieu and its working practices (Dulebohn and Hoch, 2017; Gherardi and Perrotta, 2014). In addition, it will help managers facilitate the appropriate environment to encourage bodily engagement within creative teams (Stierand et al., 2017).

Similar to earlier studies, we believe that the most effective way to research the body and creativity is to engage with an explicitly bodily organisational context. We are inspired by, for example, Kenny’s (2014) work on collaborative creativity in jazz and by studies on and within theatre (Biehl-Missal, 2010; Sawyer, 2003; Sawyer and DeZutter, 2009), education (Craft, 2008), professional service firms (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006) and toy designers (Elsbach and Flynn, 2013). To extend the knowledge produced by the aforementioned studies, this study aims to explore the roles of micro-gestures and subtle, bodily actions between various participants. More specifically, we address the subtle nuances of embodied relations that arise during the process of collaborative creativity in professional dancers’ everyday work, particularly in the generative context of their practice and rehearsals. The question guiding our analysis is as follows: *how are our bodies subtly involved in collaborative creativity at work?*

We find dance to be a useful context in which to explore collaborative creativity from an embodied perspective because the work of professional dancers consists of small, subtle, and often repeated, bodily interactions. Thus, the sensuous characteristics of collaboration may be easier to identify in a professional dance context than in more everyday settings, such as office-based work. Yet, it is collaborative creativity in office-based ‘knowledge work’ that we suggest can benefit the most from an embodied perspective. As Riach and Warren (2015) note in relation to smell and the senses, it is here where the mind is most clearly prioritised over the body, as the term ‘knowledge work’ attests. Thus, we use dance as an extreme case in which to observe the phenomenon under

study in order to shed light on the more mundane instances of group interactions in everyday knowledge work (see Marcos and Denyer, 2012).

The article proceeds as follows. First, we frame our empirical study by introducing literature on collaborative creativity, and its relationships with the body. Next, we outline our ethnographic methodology and detail the two dance productions we use as case studies. Then, we present our research material and interpretations regarding three topics: (1) moving beyond individual bodies towards collective ambitions, (2) relating to colleagues' micro-gestures and bodily nuances, and (3) the role of 'serious play' between bodies in setting the scene for the first two aspects to occur. In order to let our ethnographic data speak as freely as possible to the reader and in keeping with the inductive character of the study, we introduce the literature that frames our research topic in the early sections of the article. Further literature is invoked as we theorise our findings in the discussion section of the article, which follows the description of our three data themes. Finally, we discuss some of the implications of these findings for management learning and organisational practice beyond dance and conclude by presenting directions for future research that could further illuminate embodied subtleties in processes of collaborative creativity.

## **A collaborative understanding of creativity**

Leading theories have tended to view the individual as the locus of creativity; in other words, creativity is believed to result from an individual's cognitive process, although it can be influenced by certain individual and environmental factors (Glaveanu, 2010). In particular, influences on creativity at the group (Paulus and Korde, 2013) and organisational levels (Amabile, 1996; Drazin et al., 1999; Woodman et al., 1993) have attracted scholarly attention. However, scholars interested in group creativity tend to see the social as external to the process of creativity (Glaveanu, 2011), which has been challenged by scholars who emphasise that creativity is embedded in interaction and occurs between people (Glaveanu, 2010, 2011; Thompson, 2018).

The stream of research on 'collaborative creativity' or 'collective creativity' departs from the research on group and organisational creativity by viewing creativity as a truly collaborative activity that emerges from complex interactions between different agents (Glaveanu, 2011). Whether creativity is labelled as collaborative (e.g. Elsbach and Flynn, 2013; John-Steiner, 2000; Kenny, 2008, 2014) or collective (e.g. Hargadon and Bechky, 2006; Harvey and Kou, 2013; Sawyer and DeZutter, 2009), this conceptualisation emphasises that creativity emerges from *social interaction*, and its outcomes cannot be traced back to any single individual (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006). Thus, creativity can be understood as constructed and produced by social *systems* in which creativity is generated *collectively* (Watson, 2007) rather than *individually*.

Most studies on collaborative creativity have emphasised the mechanisms involved in the development of collective consciousness, which can be defined as a collective mode of awareness emerging from an intuitive sense of others and the world (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006; Harvey, 2014; Kenny, 2008). Although these studies have focused on dialogic engagement and close encounters, surprisingly little attention has been paid to embodied interactions and experiences within them (for an exception, see Thompson, 2018). We want to emphasise the role of these interactions and experiences in the creation of collective consciousness.

## **Grounding collaborative creativity in the body**

Embodiment is a way of knowing that involves sensuous sources of knowledge. Within organisation studies literature, the theme of embodiment has often been investigated in relation to leadership, and it has been studied in various contexts, including theatres (Biehl-Missal, 2010; Sutherland,

2013), symphony orchestras (Koivunen and Wennes, 2011), expert organisations (Ropo and Parviainen, 2001), techno DJs (Biehl, 2019) and dance (Biehl, 2017; Ryömä and Satama, 2019). Early turns to embodiment in organisation studies (Dale, 2001; Hassard et al., 2000) led to expansion of the literature on the role of the body in workplaces (De Vaujany and Aroles, 2019; Huopalainen and Satama, 2018; Valtonen et al., 2017; Yakhlef, 2010), in particular noting how bodies are implicated in processes of learning (Willems, 2018). However, a large part of the studies on the body in organisation focus on bodily appearance and bodily norms, rather than bodily movement (Biehl, 2017: 19). Throughout our article, we approach embodiment as the sensation of inhabiting a body that moves and feels (Noland, 2009) and as a 'key to understanding the lived experiences of professional work' (Adamson and Johansson, 2016: 4). Hence, we always perceive others as fundamentally corporeal (Strati, 2007).

Indeed, bodily movement has been a central part of modern-day management since the work of early theorists such as Lilian and Frank Gilbreth (Gilbreth and Gilbreth, 1916), who paid close attention to precise bodily movements in their studies of time and motion in work. These ideas were bound up with the early-20th-century drive to develop increasingly scientific ways to manage workers, perhaps most famously in the work of Taylor (1911). But significantly, the aim of early studies focusing on the body in management processes was to 'design out' spontaneity and individual discretion in favour of machine-like predictability, which is the opposite of the aspects of collaborative creativity we identify below.

Only a few scholars (Rosa et al., 2008; Tanggaard, 2012; Van der Lugt, 2002) have studied the embodiment of creativity as a process, collaborative or otherwise. Rather than as an organisational event, these scholars view creativity as an ongoing 'everyday phenomenon' (Tanggaard, 2012: 20), a practice that occurs 'between the hand and the head' (Gherardi and Perrotta, 2014: 139) and a process involving knowledge that is rooted in the body (Rosa et al., 2008). For example, Stierand (2015: 612) argues that the development of high-level creativity among the world-renowned haute cuisine chefs occurs through 'a stronger embodiment of the tools and techniques that are used as sensors to the outside world'. In his study of architects, Styhre (2011: 253) concludes that architects draw upon both cognitive and embodied resources 'embedded in their collectively enacted capacity'. Some organisational researchers have also found dance as an intriguing context, metaphor and tool with which to identify valuable aspects of organisations and management learning from an embodied perspective (Biehl, 2019; Chandler, 2012; Hujala et al., 2014; Satama, 2016; Satama and Huopalainen, 2018; Springborg and Sutherland, 2016), which is the route this study also takes.

All these studies hint at a link between the concepts of embodiment, sensory knowledge and the concept of creativity. To complement the aforementioned literature, we argue that contemporary organisations constantly face situations in which words fail and embodied interactions complement communication between colleagues. This proposition builds on an ongoing conversation within this journal: Willems' (2018: 24) study of practice-based learning among Dutch railway workers found that train dispatchers 'synchronised' their bodies with situations that arose on the railway in ways that could not really be explained. Likewise, Carroll and Smolović Jones' (2018: 199) noted how the disruption and disequilibrium necessary to bring about transformative learning in management development is most readily recognisable through participants' strong aesthetic (embodied) expressions rather than their cognitive rationalisations. In a similar spirit, Rigg (2018) discussed the meaningfulness of the body in the process of critically reflective perspectives on learning, and Katila (2019) affectively wrote on the multisensory nature of knowing and being in different organisational settings. Finally, Snoeren et al.'s (2015) exploration of on-the-job learning in a residential elder care home firmly located the body as a prime site of serendipitous learning in action.

In this study, we intend to explicitly examine these concepts to further the understanding of collaborative creativity in organisations. In our view, examining the embodied aspects of organisational

phenomena, such as collaborative creativity, has the potential to provide novel insights into deeply rooted management and organisational practices and to acknowledge the potential of ‘embodied wisdom’ (Küpers and Pauleen, 2015: 494) in managerial learning.

## **Sensory ethnography as a collaborative approach to researching dancers’ work**

We adopt an ethnographic methodological approach, which we understand to be a process of experiencing, interpreting and writing about organisational phenomena based on researcher’s own (bodily) experiences (Gilmore et al., 2019; Satama, 2020). For us, this meant ‘switching on’ the researcher’s sensory faculties so as to explicitly foreground bodily knowledge in field notes. More specifically, this entailed keeping a ‘multi-media’ field journal including notes, photographs, mindmaps and sketches about how the researcher felt, and their bodily impressions of spaces, places, interactions and happenings, before the more usual entries about behaviours and activities being observed through presence at the research site. These ‘body-first’ impressions are then used as a basis to empathise with the participants in the study (Warren, 2008), generating connections for shared bodily understanding during ad-hoc conversations and interactions (Stowell and Warren, 2018).

This approach has come to be known as ‘sensory ethnography’, which as Pink (2009) explains, draws inspiration from phenomenological anthropology (Merleau-Ponty, 1989; see also Ingold, 2008). It has also been called multisensory ethnography (Dicks, 2014) and described as an approach embedded in the wider spectrum of scholarly work that features sensory methodologies (Warren, 2008, 2012). Senses are interactive, adaptable and fluid, and they shape people’s everyday lives by serving as modes of experiencing meaningful aspects of life (Riach and Warren, 2015). Sensory ethnography emphasises that actors’ subjective, physical experiences are culturally and socially (re)produced (Sunderland et al., 2012). As such, it is an especially suitable research approach to study the embodied subtleties of collaborative creativity.

In the spirit of this study, we adopted a collaborative approach ourselves. During the fieldwork phase, Suvi actively participated in rehearsals by, for instance, turning the music on and off and giving feedback about how certain movements or sections of the production looked. Thus, the professional dancers often served as co-researchers and co-creators of the research material, as collective reflection became a form of learning throughout the research process (Gutzan and Tuckermann, 2019). Next, Suvi and Annika jointly read, discussed and reflected on potential research ideas at the very beginning of the development process for this study. The idea of collaborative creativity emerged while Suvi and Annika were discussing their research interests and expertise and when they were later joined by Samantha to benefit from her expertise in researching similar topics and in aesthetic research methods.

## **Context, research material and empirical analysis of the study**

Our research material is drawn from both ballet and contemporary dance genres. Ballet is concerned with precise shape, line, coordination and performance qualities, while contemporary dance combines the traditional controlled legwork of ballet with modern improvisations, including unpredictable directions, movement patterns and rhythms. Combining different dance genres within the same study illustrates the ways in which, despite subtle contextual differences, collaborative creativity is enacted in surprisingly similar ways.

For 2 years, between 2011 and 2014 Suvi took part in rehearsals for two separate freelance dance productions: 2 month-long production by two retired ballet dancers and a 14-month-long freelance production. Suvi had personally practiced dance for decades and was thus partly

knowledgeable about the field, which helped her gain access to the research setting. Annika, who had also practiced dance, visited one of the rehearsals of the freelance production in order to understand what was happening in the field and develop a sensitivity towards the material. Thus, both Suvi and Annika could use their aesthetic sensitivity (Warren, 2008) throughout the research process.

The first dance production was produced and performed by two retired ballet dancers, a male and a female, who had worked for the Finnish National Ballet for over 20 years and retired at the same time. This new step in their careers could be seen as a fruitful opportunity for collaborative creativity; on the one hand, the tradition of classical ballet provided a common language for the two dancers, and on the other hand, their work was no longer constrained by the rules of classical ballet.

The second dance production was a freelance performance in which a choreographer worked with five dancers, several musicians and other agents, including a composer, a makeup artist and technicians. The choreographer graduated from the London Contemporary Dance School two decades prior and had performed around the world. The dancers had different educational histories, which affected the ways in which they were able to express themselves through movement and work in the collaborative production. A couple of the dancers were schooled in classical ballet, while others had a background in contemporary dance. These professional trajectories influenced the dancers' working practices; for example, the dancers with a background in classical ballet seemed to struggle to 'let loose' while working, while the contemporary dancers sometimes struggled with how to perform the technical details of the dance piece gracefully.

The research material generated from the study included participant observations, photographs, video clips and numerous informal conversations with the dancers and other participants (see Table 1). Suvi attended the rehearsals of both productions three to four times a week, always from their beginning to the end, and the length of the rehearsals of both productions varied from 2 to 4 hours per day. During the fieldwork, Suvi kept an aesthetically sensitive diary about her feelings, senses and thoughts while she observed the professional dancers' movements and gestures. She also recorded details about their speech and the atmosphere each day. After the rehearsals ended, Suvi often stayed in the rehearsal studio or dressing room with the dancer(s) and reflected with them their thoughts and sentiments on the rehearsal of the current day.

Our analysis started with a close reading of the field notes created by Suvi. These field notes emphasised moments in professional dancers' work in which time seemed to lose meaning. They produced an emotional reaction in Suvi indicating that they provide valuable information about the subtleties of embodiment in collaborative creativity, in line with our commitment to a body-first approach.

After these descriptions from the field were complete, Suvi identified the most significant empirical episodes of embodied collaborative creativity and formed the first 'sketch' of the three aspects, which indicated the relevance of the subtleties of embodiment and the centrality of sensory interactions in collaborative creativity. Through collective reflection and an intensive exchange of thoughts between Suvi and Annika (Gutzan and Tuckermann, 2019), the three embodied aspects of collaborative creativity were further developed reflexively. Specifically, we deepened our analysis by circulating between the theory and research material and by actively discussing our thoughts and interpretations with each other. This was the second phase of our analysis. The final phase involved deeper reflection and exchange of thoughts between the three authors during the writing stage, focusing on precise examples and clarifying the definitions of collaborative creativity through the lens of embodied subtleties.

To disseminate our findings, we use photographs as evokers of bodily experiences in readers (Warren, 2012) to allow our readers to become immersed in *imagined* extracts of the observed

**Table 1.** Summary of the empirical material used in the study.

Type of empirical material	Amount of material gathered for this study	Researcher's role	Value for this study
Participant observation, freelance production	20 hours	Insider, employee of the production	Enables identification of the fine-grained, 'lived' bodily dynamics of collaborative creativity offstage.
Participant observation, retired ballet dancers' production	70 hours	First an external observer and then a friend	Reflects upon the researcher's own thoughts and feelings.
Aesthetically sensitive diary (both productions)	20 pages of handwritten text	Very intimate, researcher of the self	Provides additional knowledge beyond that of the participant observer and follower.
Informal conversations with the dancers and other agents in the field (both productions)	30 hours	Active listener, builder of a dialogue between the dancers and the self	Provides visual representations of the embodiment of collaborative creativity.
Photographs (taken by Suvi and a professional photographer) and videos (recorded by Suvi)	30 photos, access to 200 photos, 2 hours of video material	Viewer reflecting on the researcher's interpretations of the photographs	

situations (Strati, 1999). Images are helpful in 'overcom[ing] "aesthetic muteness" among organisational members and in the scholarly community' (Taylor, 2002; Warren, 2008: 576).

There are, of course, critical reflections that can be made regarding our study. First, Suvi's and Annika's personal backgrounds in dance surely affected the ways in which they interpreted the empirical material; for example, we might have taken some aspects for granted. Also, we felt that the richness of the empirical material and our interpretations were constrained by the structure and word limit of the article. Finally, within the genres of ballet and contemporary dance, there are contextual factors, such as the strict rules of ballet, that surely affected – and perhaps constrained – the ways in which collaborative creativity was materialised behind the scenes. However, our aim was to not only describe these processes within the field of dance, which might reveal their obvious and direct relevance, but also better understand creative processes in organisations more broadly. With this in mind, let us more fully discuss our empirical material.

## **Sensing embodied subtleties of collaborative creativity**

### *Moving beyond individual bodies towards collective ambitions in a creative process*

As we will describe, collaborative creativity was observed through spontaneous, nuanced variations in movements that were first created separately, and then collaboratively, by the dancers offstage. The interchange between individual ambitions and collaborative imaginings was a central feature of the creative process. For example, in the freelance dance production (see Figure 1), the two dancers separately created movements by following their personal ambitions and mirroring each other, and the choreographer let them move as they desired. Later, the dancers combined the movements they had rehearsed separately, which led to the emergence of new movement patterns as one of the dancers adjusted to the felt movements and sensory subtleties of their partner. When separate movements were combined into a coherent dance, no dancer 'stood out' as an individual, and the dancers seemed to work seamlessly to achieve a collective goal. This extended individual



**Figure 1.** The two dancers and choreographer working separately yet collaboratively.

imaginings, allowing collaborative creativity to emerge as an embodied practice and, in so doing, producing interesting power dynamics between the dancers, as we discuss further below.

Importantly, this dialogical negotiation (see Craft, 2008) took place largely on an embodied level. Through separate practices, dancers *showed* others and the choreographer how they interpreted the dance piece rather than verbally describing it. Few words were exchanged, and the creative piece unfolded in a shared symbolic space that was sensed and communicated through the dancers' and choreographer's bodies and sensory faculties (i.e. seeing, hearing, listening and *moving* in relation to others). By sensing each other, the dancers mutually produced a creative outcome, as recorded in field notes:

The atmosphere is devoted and peaceful as I step into the rehearsal studio and sit down on the floor. The choreographer puts the music on, starts to explain to the dancer: 'Use proud shapes; you can take some *bourrée* in between the postures. Try to stay up and curled in at the same time.' The choreographer cannot stay still; she is standing, and her body subtly moves and empathises with the dancer's body.

The music stops, but the dancer continues moving without the music, putting her soul into the role of the fragile roe deer. The choreographer encourages her: 'Yes, yes! Just like that; that's what I meant!' The dancer seems to easily understand the verbal advice of the choreographer and turns it into subtle movement patterns. (Field note extract, freelance dance production)

By sensing and intuiting each other's bodily presence, collaborative creativity seemed to unfold as a shared, yet unspoken, imagining of what to do and how. Another observation from the same





**Figure 2.** Sharing ideas by observing each other's fine-grained gestures.

rehearsal illustrates how collaborative creativity developed by merging individual and collaborative creativity:

After giving her certain suggestions of how to move, the choreographer lets the dancer create her own interpretation of the scene. The dancer reflects and conveys the story of the roe deer, and the choreographer follows her intensively and gives more detailed ideas about the scene: 'Try to get some ethereal softness to your hands. Your body sends impulses to your hands; it brings a sense of bestiality to the movement. Let's try it together!' The choreographer starts moving beside the dancer, and together, they produce spontaneous movements that were not choreographed in advance. Extraordinarily, I feel as if *my* body is immersed in their joint movement, and at this point in the rehearsal, I totally forget to take photographs. (Field note extract, freelance dance production)

In the episode above, collaborative creativity developed from the dancer's and choreographer's individual creativity through their close presence, the sensuous nature of the experience and bodily sharing of responsibility for development of the piece (see Figure 2). The dancer expected the choreographer to interject, as revealed during an informal conversation between her and Suvi:

Dancer: It's great to work with her within this piece. She gives us space to use our own creativity by being an equivalent part of the process, and not somebody who tells us what to do. She controlled us much more in the former production two years ago. It was difficult to follow the strict rules because every movement is performed differently by a different dancer.

This quote illustrates that when the individual ambitions of the choreographer are prioritised over collectivist goals, collaborative creativity is suppressed. The tension between individual and collective

endeavours, which is related to power, is constantly present in work settings, especially in artistic contexts such as dance. In the freelance dance production, it was necessary to constantly balance between the choreographer's personal views on one hand and the dancers' desires about how to move on the other hand. Thus, power was an important but largely hidden part of the process of collaborative creativity. The power dynamics did become visible, however, in the small, subtle moments of negotiation between the dancers' bodies in their offstage work. It is in this context that we see strong parallels to other contexts of management learning, as we elucidate further below.

In the retired ballet dancers' production, both dancers had backgrounds as soloists, and thus they were used to dancing alone or with a partner in front of a ballet choir. In this production, however, they had to find ways to suppress their backgrounds and prevent individual ambitions from rising above collective ones. This required constant negotiation, mostly through their bodies. Very subtle movements and gestures were able to communicate whether the dancers approved of others' ideas or whether they wanted to overrule them with their own ideas. The following example hints at a shared understanding of what was going on and the collective goal. Although the work could seem chaotic at times, shared understanding acted as a tool to overcome difficulties and combine different, even conflicting, ideas into a coherent whole:

It is morning, and I am observing the dancers working in a small rehearsal studio. Neither of the two dancers dominates the other. When one gets stuck on an idea, the other one helps them to get over it. I can sense mutual respect between these two artists. However, as it is eight weeks to the opening night, the overall impression of the production is one of fragmented chaos.

Although Kare [the male dancer] has mainly done the choreography, the final decisions are made collectively, as both dancers describe during an informal conversation with me between two rehearsals. During the last rehearsal of the day, they start a discussion:

Minna: Should the space start to divide as the end approaches? [with an insecure tone in her voice]

Kare: Maybe yes. But I have another idea. What if the lights just turned off, and you walked away at the end? [exchanges enthusiastic glances with Minna]

Minna: Good idea! We need to put it on the back burner. [sighs quietly and looks a bit frustrated] (Field note episode, retired ballet dancers' production)

This empirical episode illustrates how the dancers departed from their personal views and collectively negotiated between the different ideas that emerged while they developed a shared understanding of the creative outcome. The power dimension of collaborative creativity was materialised through collective respect, which allowed for quick exchange of thoughts, movements and slight nuances of each other's bodily movements offstage. It may seem as though the negotiation in the above episode was only verbal, but closer analysis reveals how it manifested on an embodied level. What this spoken – and now written – episode cannot show is that the dancers continuously performed detailed interpretation of each other's embodied signals, such as sights, tones of voice and other bodily expressions, until they achieved balance between their personal thoughts and collective ambitions. This is also related to power; the dancers' career-long relationship, based on mutual respect, trust and intimacy, means that neither is in a position to control the other's movements. Instead of manifesting as authority (as in the example of the choreographer above), power appears in subtle and persuasive ways, such as quick changes of movements, as the dancers sense the slight nuances in each other's bodies and their embodied ideas about how to proceed *together*.

Although in the above excerpt Kare expresses that he has an overall vision of the final piece, the actual performance emerged from the dancers' shared vision, meaning that both dancers listened to each other and worked in favour of the collective goal, their bodies shifting between leading and following. The ability to understand colleagues' thoughts through tiny gestures and movements is part of a genuinely collaborative spirit, as we discuss next.

### *Relating to colleagues' micro-gestures and bodily nuances*

The second embodied subtlety we identified was that the emergence of collaborative creativity was always rooted in a specific time and place. The dancers' sensory experiences varied from day to day and featured various affective states and moods shared between them through non-verbal interactions and fine-grained gestures. The episode below illustrates the dynamics related to the subtle, sensory nature of dancers' collaborative work during rehearsals:

The choreographer stands in the middle of the rehearsal hall, surrounded by five young dancers who listen to her carefully. She explains, 'Let's divide you into pairs now!' The dancers quickly form pairs without a word, just by making *quick glances with each other*, and without allowing the choreographer to say much, one of the dancers suggests, with a glint in his eye, 'Let's do this section like it was an Argentinean tango. No eye contact . . . just the feeling'. He grabs the female dancer, and they start to dance a tango with serious faces, closed eyes and exaggerated, rigid movements. The other dancers and the choreographer double up with laughter. (Field note episode, freelance dance production)

In this rehearsal, dancers continuously sensed the choreographer's and other dancers' moods and the overall atmosphere, and they started to work accordingly. It is important to note that this is a body-first process, in which the details about the current moment are communicated through subtle gestures and nuances. As work on the dance piece proceeds, collaboration intensifies, and the ideas of the choreographer (which are mostly expressed verbally) and those of the dancers (which are expressed through the fine-grained nuances of their moving bodies) become blurred. The sensory, charged nature of collaborative creativity requires the dancers to remain sensitive to their colleagues' feelings and micro-gestures, as this is how they intuit their thoughts. Movements are created through mutual interpretation of the expressed sensory states of the dancers' bodies. Thus, in this collaborative work, the dancers must be open and honest with one another because of the physical closeness and emotional intensity that characterise their work:

We share everything with each other. One would notice if someone had some worries. In this work, it is impossible to hide as we work so *close to each other*. You have to be fully who you are. (Field note extract, retired ballet dancers' production)

As the above quote illustrates, trust in your own and your partner's capabilities is a central part of collaborative work. In the dance productions, mutual trust was manifested in the bodily interactions of the agents:

The dancer starts moving as the choreographer puts on the serene music. The choreographer follows her intensely, following her movements around the rehearsal studio and *not interrupting her*. Fascinatingly, *the roles of the two are turned upside down*; it is now the dancer who is leading the current moment, and the choreographer is just following her, *giving her the space that she clearly needs*, and appreciating every single movement she creates. (Field note episode, freelance dance production)

The above observation illustrates what we see as the construction and blurring of subjectivities in collaborative creativity, which take place on an embodied level through sensory, intuited



**Figure 3.** The dancers immersing themselves in each other's movements and presence offstage.

micro-gestures and interactions. The dancer seemed to adopt the choreographer's role, and for a moment, the dancer was the choreographer and the choreographer was the audience. This change in roles was smooth and easy, and it showed the importance of subtle gestural interactions. In addition, there did not seem to be competition between the choreographer and dancer; both were engaged in each other's bodily work on a sensory level and involved in collaboratively creating movement, and due to mutual trust and respect, they shared power.

Similarly, the retired dancers' caring, respectful attitudes towards each other and the unashamed way in which they expressed their vulnerabilities and moods were evident in their movements in relation to one another. Take, for example, the bed scene (see Figure 3), which was one of the most emotionally charged scenes in their production. As Figure 3 shows, it was possible for the dancers to work on subtle micro-gestures and immerse in the emotional state of the current moment without a real bed and other set pieces, which the dancers did not have access to until a few days before the premiere. For the dancers, embodied sensitivity towards each other enabled collaborative creativity to emerge, despite the chaotic work offstage. Their focus was on the micro-gestures and fine-grained dynamics between their bodies in that specific time and place.

The dancers' bodies were implicated in the situation in a bodily primitive way, as captured in Figure 3. Full bodily immersion and concentration were required to act out the scene. Appreciation of the dancers' fine-grained gestures and 'being in the moment' led us to recognise the third aspect of collaborative creativity, which we discuss next.

### *The role of 'serious play' between bodies in setting the scene for the first two aspects to occur*

'Serious work' refers to the concentration and full immersion in collaboration that we have described above, which require a deeply embodied understanding of colleagues' emotions and intuitive



**Figure 4.** The dancers' playfulness in spontaneous moments offstage.

capabilities. 'Playful work', on the other hand, is humorous and childlike. Collaborative creativity was actualised through variation of – and a kind of dance between – these sensuously different ways of working, as illustrated in the following episode:

Minna enters the room, asking Kare how he is feeling today and explaining to me that her body feels different every day. They start working on a serene section of the piece. As they fully concentrate on the present moment, new movements are created through immersion in the music, movement and each other. As Minna touches Kare's head and looks into his eyes (see Picture 5), I am sitting in the back of the rehearsal studio, and it feels like my presence fades away. They are creating something unseen together within that moment, which is filled with slight bodily nuances, light touches and delicate whispers.

Suddenly, they jump to a totally different section, which is still messy and unfinished. It doesn't seem to bother them, as they concentrate on improvising a series of unfinished movements. They laugh and play with the movements as they are stuck with how to proceed. Kare plays the fool with the movements, while Minna acknowledges his jokes by continuing to improvise in the same spirit. (Field note extract, retired ballet dancers' production)

In the above observation and Figure 4, collaborative creativity is generated through playful interactions between the two dancers as well as their serious work. We argue that this interplay is only possible because of the shared bodily intuitions we have already described. The dancers get ideas from each other's expressions and movements about ways to develop the piece in a playful, cheerful way, which complements their serious and concentrated work on other sections.



**Figure 5.** The dancers trying different ways of sliding.

As the atmosphere of Figure 4 suggests, the space is filled with laughter and joy. Bodily movements express humour, but seriousness and concentration are also fully embodied, as the outside world ceases to exist and the dancers focus solely on each other and the music.

In the freelance dance production, the playful aspect of the dancers' work is visible in the episode below, which describes a rehearsal of the slide scene:

We are in an abandoned, dark, rusty shipyard in the harbour. It is a complete contrast to the neat and bright rehearsal studio they have been rehearsing in until now. The dancers build the slide from wooden pieces and begin contact improvisation following the comments of the choreographer: 'Feel free to try and explore the movements!' Both the choreographer and the dancers are in stitches [i.e. laughing uncontrollably] as the dancers playfully improvise by trying different kinds of slides while in contact with each other. The dancers need to adapt to the circumstances of the different places in which the rehearsals are held. 'We just need to pass through this with the material that we already have', the choreographer explains and continues, 'This slide scene should be the climax of the story'. (Field note extract, freelance dance production)

The creative process is a set of experiments conducted with a playful attitude regarding colleagues' presence and bodily dynamics. Figure 5 captures the work performed in these experiments; the wooden slide is covered with black fabric, and the dancers slide, relaxed, without knowing exactly how this experiment will end. The choreographer, who is standing on the left side in Figure 5, follows the dancers quietly and intensely, commenting 'yes', 'mmm' or 'oh, that looks good'. Importantly, *she cannot avoid moving her own body while immersing herself in the gestures of the dancers*. These disengaged experiments, which do not have a predetermined result, capture serious play in the embodiment of collaborative creativity. While watching the practicing dancers,

the choreographer is not only looking at them but also *feeling* them, as if she was one of them, and their movements are reciprocated by her own body so that she can fully understand them, not in her mind but in her *felt* experiences. She joins the process of playful experimentation, sensing the process in her body as the improvising dancers lead her. This is a reversal of the power dynamics we discussed above.

To conclude, the embodied creative work in the two dance productions was characterised by switching between serious and playful moments, both of which appeared to be essential to the development of the pieces into coherent performances onstage. While the seriousness of the dancers' work allowed them to analytically process the pieces, the playfulness was characterised by spontaneous humour and unexpected experiments. Moving between these two complementary ways of working – which can collectively be called 'serious play' – led to unexpected and fundamentally bodily collaborative results. Next, we discuss how these findings can be applied to everyday organisational contexts in which management learning takes place.

## **Discussion: The collaboratively dancing organisation**

We identified three aspects through which embodied collaborative creativity emerges: (1) moving beyond individual bodies towards collective ambitions, (2) relating to colleagues' micro-gestures and bodily nuances, and (3) the role of 'serious play' between bodies in setting the scene for the first two aspects to occur. Specifically, we showed that sensing of, and tuning into, specific shared, emplaced moments happens first and foremost through the body. In other words, intuitive sensing of colleagues' presence, mood and movement were the basis for collaborative creativity in the productions we observed. Several studies have acknowledged the salient role of embodied knowing and other forms of aesthetic knowing in organisational life in general and creativity in particular (e.g. Dovey et al., 2017; Küpers, 2017; Rigg, 2018; Rosa et al., 2008; Stierand, 2015; Styhre, 2011). Our findings provide nuance to these studies by empirically showing how the body is *subtly* implicated in various processes of negotiation, creation, communication and, ultimately, learning. As Stierand et al. (2017: 165) write, 'having an idea is an essential act of creativity', and according to Van Iterson et al. (2017: 221), 'ideas are feelings first'. We have illustrated how those idea-feelings are fundamentally embodied, in turn affecting the bodies of others. Importantly, we have also highlighted how power moves between the dancers and other agents in this process, something to which we return here as central to the application of our ideas to broader management learning contexts.

### ***Embodied subtleties in the self-managed organisation***

In the productions we described above, embodied sensitivity towards others was developed as the dancers moved and the boundaries between them began to blur, transforming the participants into a creative entity as opposed to a group of people just working together. The choreographer felt the dancers' movements in her own body, and the dancers felt each other's movements; bodily boundaries were dissolved and the inter-corporeal (and therefore inherently collaborative) character of embodiment was revealed (e.g. Riach and Warren, 2015).

Although we believe that creativity emerged collaboratively, this process often began with one dancer taking the lead (most clearly seen in the actions of the choreographer), while others followed. This has implications for management learning in knowledge-based economies, in which organisational members have high autonomy and are not subject to traditional authority structures, such as bureaucratic hierarchies (e.g. Pearce and Manz, 2005).

Despite the illusion of egalitarianism, power dynamics still emerge in the so-called 'self-managed teams' that characterise many knowledge-intensive firms due to the social, intersectional

characteristics of their members, such as their gendered and racialised perceptions of expertise and leadership (Foldy et al., 2009; Liu, 2019). As our data indicate, for collaborative creativity to emerge, power must be dispersed such that less prominent members of the group are able to enact what Satama (2017) called ‘embodied agency’. This could be observed when the dancers improvised the slide scene. Each dancer’s movements led the choreographer to *feel* the creativity expressed by the group. We suggest that when training self-managed teams, managers should implicate the body and embodied, sensory interactions as forms of learning needed to create collaboratively (Rigg, 2018). Sensitivity towards others and oneself could – and, ideally, does – enable more open and plurivocal conversations in organisations about difficult and sensitive issues. As Simpson et al. (2018) argue, relational sociality can be understood as an imaginative engagement with others’ experiences, as if one is the other, bringing an embodied and emotional level to collaboration that is crucial for learning. The next section discusses the potential applications of our finding that learning *physically* evolves as a process between bodies.

### *Embodied subtleties, micro-gestural power and the dynamics of virtual teams*

Throughout this study, we have conceptualised collaborative creativity as ‘a complex, messy, embodied and non-linear process’ (Stierand et al., 2017: 165) through which dance performances evolved. Leadership was shifted between participants through subtle, gestural interactions, which sometimes made it difficult to say who was leading and who was following. The importance of this finding is underscored by literature on the development of artificial intelligence with embodied cognition. For example, Breazeal et al. (2009) explain that robots need to be taught to read the nuances in humans’ gestures and expressions in order to read their minds. This is usually taken for granted in organisational life. For example, in strategy development (e.g. Dameron et al., 2015), tiny details of actors’ movements play a crucial role in how plans come to fruition (Gylfe et al., 2016). Similarly, Hindmarsh and Pilnick (2007: 1395) describe the importance of ‘ephemeral teamwork’ (i.e. the barely intuited co-presence of surgeons and anaesthetists) for smooth running of the operating theatre.

Our findings and those of previous studies suggest the importance of a predominantly equal balance of micro-gestural power in workplace relationships, in line with contemporary theories of relational leadership (Biehl, 2019; Ryömä and Satama, 2019; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). However, it is important to proceed with caution when applying these results, particularly in the context of larger, more formal organisational situations. Bell and King (2010) critically explore the significance of body pedagogy in socialisation, arguing that white, masculine, hegemony is maintained in academia through embodied dynamics learned by newcomers. They explain how the ethics and culture of a dominant group is learned by newcomers observing ‘the bodies of participants [. . .] onto which the culture is inscribed’ (Bell and King, 2010: 438). This suggests that some bodily movements and demeanours have enough value that others must imitate them to fit in. However, Romberg’s (2017) analysis of gesture among religious shamans highlights a slightly different dimension of embodied power. Through performance, gestures, dancing, touching, blowing and other actions imbued with symbolic power, this power is transferred to the shamans, further legitimising their right to make those movements. Gestures do not serve as manifestations of pre-existing power; rather, power comes *from* movement. We argue that similar processes can be observed in our empirical material when the dancers found their colleagues’ movements to be favourable and built upon them with their own movements, thereby transferring power back and forth in a reciprocal manner.

As we noted at the start of the article, organisations have intended to exert control over workers’ movements for over 100 years, suppressing opportunities for creativity in order to improve the efficiency of production lines (Gilbreth and Gilbreth, 1916). Power has long been exercised through



top-down authority over the micro-movements of workers, and this is still evident in the modern workplace (see, for example, recent reports of excessive bodily regulation by Amazon in their warehouses (Solon, 2018)). So although here we suggest the opposite, locating embodied subtleties as the very stuff of creative engagement, we also remain mindful of the bio-social power dynamics that will always be present in organisational situations.

Embodied aspects of collaborative creativity are also affected by the contemporary shift towards virtual teams and work. A lack of co-presence has often been identified as a potential limitation of technology-enabled collaborative work, but it has rarely been discussed in depth (see Dulebohn and Hoch, 2017). We do not aim to argue against virtual work, but to invite those who manage virtual teams to provide enough space and opportunities for face-to-face encounters or other sensuous ways of communicating. As we noted at the outset, this need has become particularly pressing during the Covid-19 pandemic where millions of workers have been forced to work from home and communicate with each other exclusively via remote means, often using video-calling platforms. All of a sudden, *all* organisational work – routine and creative – had to be performed without co-workers being physically present. The use of video enabled platforms speaks to our desire to see who we are interacting with, even if we cannot be co-present. However many people reported finding this new way of relating to each other to be physically exhausting, and emerging research suggests that the absence (or ambiguity) of embodied subtleties was a key reason for this. “On a video chat, we need to work harder to process non-verbal cues. Our minds are together when our bodies feel we’re not. . .” (Sander and Bauman, 2020). This is undoubtedly a fascinating area for future research as we note below.

Feeling or sensing other agents move and become excited, determined, afraid or defensive through exchange of embodied subtleties is also a powerful way to understand the contagiousness of moods and other group dynamics. The need to socialise teams to work well together is not new (e.g. Druskat and Wheeler, 2003; Rickards and Moger, 2000), but based on our findings, we encourage organisations to enable more body-first processes that take into account the subtleties of bodily movement. Ironically, it seems that dance could be an ideal body-first vehicle for socialising teams, as we and other management scholars have proposed (Biehl, 2017, 2019; Chandler, 2012; Hujala et al., 2014; Satama, 2017), but other arts-based interventions could be equally valuable (e.g. Antonacopoulou and Taylor, 2019).

### *The embodied subtleties of serious play: The fun organisation*

Finally, the playful – but serious – work that was realised through subtle movement characterised the dancers’ attitudes towards their own and others’ bodies. As Küpers (2017: 994) notes, ‘Etymologically, play refers to “dleggh” (from Indo-European meaning, literally, meaning movement, motion, energetic engagement, discovering new possibilities), which implies moving bodies and embodiment, venturing toward the novel’. Therefore, to extend the view that a collective consciousness, shared thinking or understanding is required for collaborative creativity (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006; Harvey, 2014; Kenny, 2008), we demonstrated that physical and mental closeness, embodied sensitivity and micro-gestural negotiations within a playful yet serious situation are crucial. This suggests that, in everyday organisational life, it is necessary to reduce formal control in order to allow the playful attitude needed for collaborative creativity to develop.

The extent to which *true* play is possible in large, rule-bound organisations is questionable; as Warren and Fineman (2007) have shown, the concept of serious play has come under scrutiny for its apparently paradoxical nature (Statler and Heracleous, 2011). Nonetheless, play at work has long been associated with creativity (Anderson, 1994) and has interested management scholars for some time (see the contributions to Ephemera, 2011). The shift towards playful and/or fun work environments in

order to improve organisational outcomes, particularly in modern knowledge-based organisations (Spraggon and Bodolica, 2017), is well-established. This likely means that organisations are already a fertile ground for collaborative creativity.

In addition, play, serious or otherwise, is laden with power dynamics. Humour and play are often used to protect instigators from accusations of bullying or harassment disguised as joking, and workplace banter is a feature of many high-pressure and psychologically damaging organisational environments (Plester, 2015). Thus, it is important for managers to foster an environment of mutual trust and respect in order for play and fun to be perceived as beneficial (Tews et al., 2015). However, play is also a productive way to release the tensions that can arise when working with others, as described in some of the empirical episodes. For example, the playful experimentations with sliding described in the last section of our analysis seem to be inseparable from the creative process (Stierand et al., 2017). Play is often used as a means to divert from the actual creative work, affecting creativity more indirectly (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006).

In sum, following Küpers (2017), our contribution to the literature is explicit recognition of the role of embodied subtleties in serious play and the need for organisations to foster the conditions for not only minds but also *bodies* to play.

## Conclusion

We began this study by questioning how the body is subtly involved in the process of collaborative creativity and then explore this topic through an ethnographic case study of rehearsals for two dance productions. We showed how existing debates about collaborative creativity tend to sideline the body in favour of social processes (Glaveanu, 2011; Hargadon and Bechky, 2006; Sawyer and DeZutter, 2009), and through our empirical material, we revealed the importance of prioritising the body, not only in dance but also in organisational contexts. We discussed the potential implications of our findings for contemporary organisations and management learning, such as training for self-managed teams (e.g. Druskat and Wheeler, 2003).

Developing a sensitivity to the power dynamics evidenced by the embodied subtleties of members could help individuals to see that paying attention to how they respond to others through movement is an important part of the creative process. We suggest that embodied subtleties should be taken seriously by managers of virtual teams for the same reasons, although such teams must use video technologies or arrange physical meetings for important tasks. Even if – or perhaps *because* – contemporary work happens largely in our heads, we must pay closer attention to how our bodies generate communicative meanings, messages and hidden qualities that explain a lot about ourselves as organisational agents, even if we are not aware. Finally, we reflected on how embodied subtleties within collaborative creativity might be nurtured in management learning settings by paying attention to the conditions needed to foster serious play while remaining mindful of humour and the potentially asymmetric effects of play on power.

Our conclusions indicate some interesting avenues for future research since the applications of our findings to less physical organisational settings are hypothetical at present. As we discussed above, studies of embodied subtleties in virtual teams would be especially illuminating as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, with organisations and workers realising that virtual working is more viable than perhaps had been previously thought (Press, 2020). In addition, as the atmospheres we observed were optimistic and supportive, we wonder how the role of embodied subtleties in collaborative creativity would be affected by tensions, contradictions and arguments within teams. For these reasons, we believe that the exercise of gestural power would be a fascinating topic to investigate. This is particularly important to explore in relation to gender, race, colonialism or intersectionality, which may result in the persistence of inequality and exclusion in workplace settings, particularly in creative industries, with a poor record of encouraging diversity (Conor et al., 2015).

In the broadest sense, our study encourages organisations and managers to understand the concept of collaborative creativity in a different way. Allowing for embodied co-presence, remaining mindful of team dynamics and facilitating of play are crucial for the emergence of collaborative creativity through *bodies* as well as through the more traditional means of social connection and knowledge sharing. Even if organisations already enable rich social interaction and collaboration via verbal communication, bodily presence and embodied signals play a significant role in conveying hidden, subconscious or even repressed experiences. Even small teams, entrepreneurs, researchers and knowledge-intensive professionals can make use of this finding; a creative working process involves appreciation for even the ‘smallest’ ideas through paying attention to group members’ movements, gestures and embodied subtleties.


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