

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Todd Carroll

Dancing Our Way to Meaning

by Garamh Kim

Compared to fields like visual arts and music, dance often suffers from a shortage of tangible, practical resources. Books specifically addressing dance education remain scarce. Therefore, encountering Anabella Lenzu's *Teaching and Learning Dance through Meaningful Gestures* was immediately gratifying. From the very first page, I was genuinely excited—here was a text that promised practical insights grounded in personal experience and vivid imagery. Rich with photographs and reflections, the book appeared inviting, warm, and accessible from the outset.

At the same time, Lenzu's book stands out for its innovation and depth, rooted in her belief that body and mind, anatomy and energy, skill and intention are inseparable. This belief shapes not only the book's content but also its distinctive writing style, which emphasizes a dynamic and holistic interplay of theory, practice, sensation, and reflection. Whether she discusses anatomy, breath, or memory, everything ultimately converges toward dance, unfolding in a spiral structure that reflects the embodied, fluid, and non-linear rhythm of movement. Reading Lenzu's chapters feels remarkably similar to participating in a dance class, where linear narratives give way to intuitive, sensory-driven exploration. This approach invites readers to engage with knowledge through the body, mirroring the very nature of dance itself.

In the opening chapters, Lenzu emphasizes the necessity for dance educators to cultivate their own clear, authentic voice through developing a personal teaching philosophy. Her approach reaches beyond technical competence and frames teaching as a political and ethical act. The first chapter, "Our Responsibility as Dance Educators," introduces this idea, underscoring the importance of having clarity in one's teaching values. As a teacher myself, I resonated deeply with Lenzu's assertion that a clear teaching perspective is essential for meaningful student engagement and authentic learning experiences.

In the second chapter, "Understanding the Body: Mind, Physique, and Spirit," Lenzu expands on the concept of gesture—not just as a physical act, but as an intentional, expressive bridge between inner thought and external form. Lenzu beautifully illustrates movement

as an energetic dialogue between the performer's inner intention (what she calls *anima* or *alma*) and the audience's emotional reception. Her depiction reminds me of Korean traditional dance practices, where energy (*?gi*) and emotion (*?heung*) similarly flow through dancers and connect profoundly with audiences.

Subsequent chapters blend seamlessly as Lenzu explores the interconnectedness of the teaching practices: understanding oneself, understanding students, and understanding context. For Lenzu, these three understandings are inseparable. Effective teaching, she argues, demands a nuanced awareness of one's own identity and beliefs, paired with a sensitive understanding of students' backgrounds, motivations, and emotional states. This empathetic and reflective stance aligns closely with my own teaching experiences, affirming my belief that education extends far beyond mere technical transmission. Rather, it involves recognizing each student as a whole person, with their own rich histories, feelings, and aspirations, and creating a responsive classroom environment where everyone, including the teacher, is learning continuously.

Lenzu further highlights the critical importance of understanding the cultural, institutional, and artistic contexts shaping our teaching practices. Drawing from my own experiences teaching across different cultural environments, her discussions struck a familiar chord. For example, when I introduce one of the main concepts of Korean dance, *??? (movement within stillness)* to American students, I make connections to relatable ideas such as the contained energy in contemporary dance or the poised control seen in ballet adagios. Such parallels help bridge understanding, allowing my students to grasp unfamiliar ideas through familiar frameworks. Lenzu validates these pedagogical strategies, stressing the importance of adapting teaching to students' varied cultural and personal frames of reference. This responsiveness, she notes, empowers students to connect deeply with dance as a meaningful part of their lives.

The chapters "Teaching Artist vs. Technicians," "Teaching Strategies," and "Guide to the Body" further deepen the philosophical exploration of teaching and learning dance. Rather than providing step-by-step instruction, Lenzu approaches dance education holistically, intertwining emotional, philosophical, and somatic perspectives into a vibrant, organic flow. Her integration of theoretical inquiry with embodied practice and sensory awareness intentionally mirrors the dynamic, multi-layered experiences dancers encounter in studios, rehearsals, and performances.

In her final chapter, "Advice for Students," Lenzu shares personal narratives of rigorous ballet training, motherhood, injury, and transformation. Her candid reflections offer readers compassionate guidance and emphasize the validity of diverse career paths and personal definitions of success. She resists the common conflation of technical perfection and artistic worth, arguing powerfully for authenticity, resilience, and self-acceptance. Her vulnerability here deepens readers' trust, reinforcing the human dimension of dance education.

While Lenzu's book offers rich insight, some sections would benefit from offering additional resources for educators and clarifying key ideas through more specific examples. For instance, sharing practical strategies for educators to manage their mental health and emotional resilience could further enrich the text and support Lenzu's emphasis on empathy and reflexivity.

Similarly, some of Lenzu's evocative metaphors might be made more impactful with concrete examples or further elaboration. When she compares dance teaching to the training of parrots, the metaphor is intriguing but remains open-ended. While it likely critiques more than just rote imitation—perhaps signaling concerns about passive learning or lack of critical engagement—it also raises questions about how we differentiate between healthy forms of technical training and more limiting, mechanical approaches. Without additional context, readers are left to assume, potentially projecting their own interpretation, which may or may not reflect Lenzu's intended meaning.

Teaching and Learning Dance through Meaningful Gestures resonates deeply because of its openness, sincerity, and experimental spirit. Through vivid personal reflections and philosophical insights, Lenzu invites educators and dancers to re-examine familiar assumptions, embrace complexity, and appreciate the profound interconnectedness between dance and life itself. As a dance educator navigating these complexities daily, I found genuine companionship and validation in her words.

Lenzu's reflections are a powerful reminder that teaching dance transcends mere skill transmission—it is fundamentally about cultivating human connection. Dance educators, students, and practitioners across disciplines will discover in this text not only practical inspiration but also profound affirmation of dance as a powerful, integrative force within our lives.

[Teaching and Learning Dance Through Meaningful Gestures](#). Anabella Lenzu. 2025.

Home Page Image Description: *A woman holds a full-size human skeleton model in her arms, meeting its gaze with puckered lips in an expressive, playful gesture. She wears a black shirt and is framed against a solid black background. Her body and the skeleton mirror each other, suggesting a dialogue between life and anatomical structure. The image appears on both a tablet and a hardcover book placed on a wooden surface, emphasizing the book's physical and digital presence.*

Article Page Image Description: *A dance educator, dressed in black, leads a group of five barefoot students in a studio with dark flooring and overhead lights. She speaks with her hand raised expressively, fingers extended in a gesture of precision and intent. The students—wearing a mix of gray, red, and blue rehearsal clothes—stand alert, their gazes fixed on the teacher. The atmosphere is focused and intimate, with attention drawn toward the embodied transmission of knowledge through gesture.*

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