



# Soft skills in dance

a new guide to thinking about  
your professional development

Image courtesy of Empowering Dance (archive of the project)



Sara Houston.  
Photo: University  
of Roehampton.

Imagine how useful it would be to articulate our skills of working with others successfully, sensitively, with care – to ourselves, employers, funders and collaborators...**Sara Houston**, Professor of Dance and Community Engagement, University of Roehampton did just this as part of a European partnership Empowering Dance. Below she describes and invites feedback on the result of their enquiry: a rich, engaging and free digital resource useful within and beyond dance.

**T**he new Soft Skills in Dance digital guidebook begins: “What skills do we practice when we share a dance experience? When we connect eyes, offer a hand, or balance together in a moment. What is happening? We are practising the skills of togetherness.”

It's an opening that invites the reader to think about dancing and working in relationship to others and some of the vital skills we need when we dance and work together. Throughout the guidebook, there are reflective tasks and games that encourage the dance artist to think through actions, thoughts, behaviours and intentions in relation to soft skills.

Soft skills are sometimes known as life skills, 21st century skills or social and emotional skills. They're the oil that makes for smooth negotiations, successful communication, thoughtful leadership, happily dancing participants.

But what are they? This is the problem. ‘Soft skills’ is a very vague and underused term. And even if we can list them – for example, understanding and appreciating differences, recognising strengths, taking care of others, patience, flexibility and adaptability, conflict resolution to name a few – we often don't appreciate when we are using these skills. We also don't articulate how we use them well to others, to potential employers, to our collaborators and funders. We do use them though – in fact, dance artists working in community settings use soft skills a lot. We may even develop more soft skills while we practice, but the knowledge is implicit and not often articulated.

Can you imagine how useful it would be to articulate our skills of working with others successfully, sensitively, with care? Can you imagine how useful it would be to translate what we do in the dance setting to other work contexts outside of dance, or to our different contexts in which we lead dance? We can talk about our work in different settings, >>

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Empowering Dance,  
Bassano del Grappa,  
August 2022.  
Photo: Arina Dolgikh.



“We can talk about our work in different settings because soft skills translate across different facets of work. That is their beauty. They underpin social interaction and emotional competencies – anywhere where we need to relate to others.”

because soft skills translate across different facets of work. That is their beauty. They underpin social interaction and emotional competencies – anywhere where we need to relate to others (the boardroom, the dance studio or even in the bedroom).

In 2020 the *Empowering Dance: The Soft Skills Teaching and Learning Approach* project began. It was a partnership between seven organisations across six countries, funded by the Erasmus Plus scheme of the European Commission: CSC - Centro per la Scena Contemporanea (Bassano del Grappa, Italy), Dansateliers (Rotterdam, Netherlands), HIPP - Croatian Institute for Movement and Dance (Zagreb, Croatia), K3 | Tanzplan Hamburg / Kampnagel (Germany), La Briqueterie CDCN (Val-de-Marne, France), University of Roehampton (London, UK), University of Zagreb, Academy of Fine Arts (Croatia).

In a previous Empowering Dance project, the



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partners realised that soft skills were crucial to contemporary dance practices in participatory settings. Through the research, they identified the soft skills that were used by dance artists and participants. This time, in 2020, we wanted to create a tool that would help dance artists identify, articulate and translate their soft skills. We wanted a free digital tool that would benefit dance artists and the communities and organisations they worked for and with. We wanted a tool that would not tell people what to do, but to help them



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recognise and articulate the skills living in their own practices.

Four of the partner European Dance Houses, commissioned five dance artists who had community practices to work with the Empowering Dance research team. The dance artists were Giovanna Garzotto, Elena Sgarbossa, Connor Schumacher, Patrícia Carolin Mai, Marcela Santander Corvalán. We investigated how we might enhance their identification and articulation of soft skills. At the same time, we refined and developed our understanding of soft skills in dance. The Empowering Dance team then created the guidebook, led by myself (from University of Roehampton, UK) and Monica Gillette (dance artist and dramaturg, Germany). The illustrations were created by students in the Academy of Fine Arts at the University of Zagreb, Croatia.

Easily obtained, (and in English and French) the guidebook can be read at any time, in as many sittings as you like. Although it is designed to be developmental, you can access it from any point and we encourage you to go back to it again after a while – the soft skills you are prioritising at any moment might be different! There are audio guides to get into your body, reflective tasks to do at the computer, videos to watch, there are games to play in the dance studio with others, there are references to gain more information from and a specially made glossary.

At the core, is the soft skills interactive map, which is there as a reference throughout. It was developed in consultation not only with all partners, but with groups of dance artists in Paris, Hamburg, Rotterdam, Bassano del Grappa and London. What I find so exciting about the map and the whole guidebook, is that it was a collaborative effort across so many different countries with different approaches and ways of talking about community and dance.

And what is more exciting, is that it will be used and reshaped by the people who go on to use it, who will take bits of it to adapt for their own practices and who then share it with participants and colleagues. Yes, we are encouraging you to do that! The guidebook is for any dance artist working in a participatory context, it is for those who want to work outside of dance, it is for those whose work or practice sits alongside that of community dance, it is for those who are curious about how the body becomes the site of the growth and development of soft skills. If you're reading this, then give it a go! And then tell us about what you discover. We would love to know whether it made an impact on you.

We have been holding workshops in Rotterdam, Bassano del Grappa and London to delve deeper into the practice of the guidebook. The UK workshop was held at Roehampton and supported by People Dancing. Additionally, Monica Gillette and I gave a talk for People Dancing's online continuing professional development strand Perspectives on Practice in November. There are still workshops in Paris, Zagreb and Hamburg to go. Already the feedback has been wonderfully rich, with people telling us how useful the guidebook has been. And we would like yours too! Please try it, then tell me about it by filling out the feedback form in the guidebook or emailing me at [empoweringdance2@gmail.com](mailto:empoweringdance2@gmail.com). Enjoy!

#### Info

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