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„Organizacija kreativnog
okupljanja” - OKO



YOUTH IN MOTION - DANCE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

**Toolkit for using contemporary dance in
working with young people from
disadvantage areas**

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Authors: the words

Dance is really a powerful tool for engaging young people from rural communities, offering them a creative and inclusive space to express themselves, share their stories, and connect with others. Through movement, we can gain confidence, improve communication skills, and develop teamwork in a natural and enjoyable way. Dance encourages self-discovery, strengthens cultural identity, and promotes mutual understanding among participants from different backgrounds. It also helps youth workers and young people together break social barriers, fosters active participation, and creates opportunities for personal growth. By dancing, young people learn to trust themselves and others, building a stronger sense of belonging, empowerment, and community spirit, no matter from where they come from.

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About the project and OKO



The project *Y-MOTION: Dance for social change in rural communities* has the aim to strengthen young people and youth workers in using contemporary dance in their communities in disadvantage and geographically distant areas. It came from the urgent need to implement body and holistic methodologies in current divided world, full of wars, crisis and uncertainty and young people from rural areas are the one whose voices are not heard or listened to.

The project is co-financed by Erasmus+ programme of EU.

OKO is artistic youth work organization which is established in 2005 with the aim to work in fields of human rights, peace education and youth work. OKO received multiple accolades for their artistic and youth work and they managed to survive as an organization, providing quality programmes and psychosocial support for those who needed it the most.

Toolkit is aimed for youth workers, theatre/dance practitioners to use it in everyday practice, especially in work with young people from rural areas.

Dance and/or Play: the terms

Although dance and play share elements of creativity, enjoyment, and self-expression, they are distinct activities with different purposes and structures. Play is generally spontaneous, flexible, and driven by exploration, imagination, or enjoyment without a predetermined outcome. It allows participants to experiment, take on roles, create rules, and interact freely with their environment and peers.

Dance, on the other hand, is a form of movement-based expression that often involves intentionality, rhythm, and aesthetic communication. While dance can include playful elements, it usually focuses on expressing emotions, ideas, stories, or cultural traditions through the body. Dance may be structured through choreography or guided improvisation, requiring greater awareness of movement, space, and artistic expression.

In youth work, both play and dance are valuable educational tools. Play encourages creativity, problem-solving, and social interaction, while dance promotes body awareness, confidence, emotional expression, and collaboration. The key distinction lies in their primary focus: play emphasizes exploration and enjoyment, whereas dance emphasizes movement as a medium of communication and artistic expression. Together, they can complement one another, creating engaging learning experiences that support the personal and social development of young people. Of course, we need to be aware of ethical and inclusive aspects of both of them, from thinking about the boundaries, professional and physical to try to maintain limits of space, safety (dramatic distance, real, trauma), using symbols and even aesthetic moment in correlation with objects and others in co-creation.

Short history of contemporary dance*

Contemporary dance in Europe developed during the 20th century as artists began to move away from the strict codes of classical ballet and search for freer forms of expression. Early influences came from modern dance pioneers in the United States, but European artists quickly developed their own approaches grounded in experimentation, physicality, and theatre.

After World War II, contemporary dance in Europe expanded through independent companies and festivals, especially in countries like Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. Choreographers began integrating dance with theatre, music, and visual arts, creating interdisciplinary performance styles. German Tanztheater, strongly associated with Pina Bausch, became particularly influential by combining expressive movement with dramatic, everyday gestures and strong emotional content.

During the 1970s and 1980s, improvisation and somatic practices such as release technique and contact improvisation became widely used across Europe, encouraging collaboration, body awareness, and collective creation. Dance education and community projects also started to grow, linking contemporary dance with social and cultural engagement.

In the late 20th and 21st centuries, European contemporary dance became highly diverse, shaped by migration, intercultural exchange, and collaboration between artists from different backgrounds. Today it is a dynamic and evolving field that connects artistic innovation with education, youth work, and social participation.

Contemporary dance and youth work: few words

Contemporary dance and youth work are closely connected through their shared commitment to participation, personal growth of young people, inclusion, and empowerment. Contemporary dance is not (always) limited by strict rules or technical perfection; instead, it values creativity, experimentation, and the unique expression of each individual. These characteristics align strongly with the principles of youth work, which seeks to create supportive environments where young people can develop their skills, confidence, and sense of identity. Also, it means that both are planned activities with certain aims and structure.

In youth work settings, contemporary dance provides a powerful non-verbal method of communication. It enables young people to explore emotions, experiences, and social issues through movement, often allowing them to express thoughts and feelings that may be difficult to articulate with words. This is particularly valuable when working with diverse groups, including young people from different cultural backgrounds, rural areas, or those facing social, economic, or educational barriers.

Furthermore, contemporary dance can be used as a tool for active citizenship and social engagement. Through creative exploration and performance, young people can reflect on community challenges, raise awareness of important issues, and contribute their voices to social dialogue. In this way, contemporary dance becomes more than an art form- it becomes a meaningful educational approach that supports holistic youth development and encourages young people to become active, confident, and engaged members of society.

The role of co-creation, collaboration and devising in dance youth work

Although closely connected, they have different roles in the creative process. Sometime in practice we are not sure how to divide these common approaches. Reflection can help youth workers to see in which part of young peoples' development these approaches should be applicable or visible

Collaboration is the act of working together toward a shared goal. It focuses on teamwork, communication, mutual support, and respect for different perspectives. Through collaboration, young people learn to build trust and work collectively. Shortly it means that youth worker is working together with young people to create dance performance.

Co-creation emphasizes shared decision-making and ownership. Participants are not only involved in activities but also help shape the content, direction, and outcomes of the process. This strengthens empowerment, inclusion, and a sense of responsibility. It means that youth workers should let young people be involved in all stages of performance planning- form creating costumes, direct parts (or whole) of the performance, decide where performance should be presented etc.

Devising is a creative method used to generate original dance material, as to say "from the scratch". Participants explore ideas, movements, and themes through experimentation, creating performances based on their own experiences and imagination.

Together, these approaches make dance youth work more participatory, inclusive, and meaningful, helping young people develop creativity, confidence, communication skills, and a stronger sense of belonging.

Contemporary dance and NFE methods

Contemporary dance and non-formal education (further in text: NFE) methods complement each other naturally through their shared values on participation, creativity, and personal development. Unlike traditional learning approaches that often rely on lectures and fixed outcomes, both contemporary dance and NFE encourage active engagement, experimentation, reflection, and learning through experience.

As we already mentioned, contemporary dance provides a unique space where young people can express ideas, emotions, and perspectives through movement, regardless of their language skills, educational background, or previous artistic experience. This makes it a highly inclusive tool that values individual differences and diverse forms of expression, and also its easier for participants who did not have previous dance experience to free themselves. Through improvisation, co-creation, and collaborative movement tasks, participants develop communication, self-confidence, empathy, and teamwork skills. A lot of drama pedagogues in their practice avoid using NFE methods, fearing that it will become more like "seminar". Actually, they forget that there are different ways and types of learning so NFE methods give holistic approach towards any topic important for young people.

When combined with non-formal education methods such as group discussions, role play, storytelling, reflection circles, games, and experiential learning activities, contemporary dance can deepen learning outcomes and create meaningful connections between body, mind, and emotions.

The inclusive nature of contemporary dance ensures that every participant can contribute according to their abilities and comfort level.






*"Dance, dance, otherwise
we are lost!"*

Pina Bausch

Contemporary dance exercises in youth work: examples

Each exercise will have markings for

Complexity- , Duration-  and
Needed materials (Yes/No/By wish)- 

Exercise: **"Name-with-movement circle"**

This inclusive contemporary dance exercise helps participants build confidence, learn each other's names, and explore movement in a creative way.

Participants stand in a circle. One by one, each person steps into the center, says their name, and creates a simple movement or gesture that represents how they feel today. It can be as small or as large as they wish.

The whole group then repeats the participant's name and copies the movement together. Continue until everyone has shared.

For the second round, the facilitator combines several participants' movements into a short sequence. The group practices the sequence together, connecting the movements smoothly and exploring different dynamics such as fast, slow, soft, or energetic.

To finish, divide participants into small groups. Each group creates a short dance using at least three movements collected from the circle and presents it to the others.

Reflection questions:

- How did it feel when others repeated your movement?
- What did you learn about the group through movement?
- How can movement help us communicate without words?

This exercise develops self-expression, creativity, inclusion, memory, communication, and a sense of belonging within the group.



Easy to moderate



5-25 minutes



As needed but not necessary

Exercise: **“Mirroring in circles.”**

Description: participants stand in a circle, so everyone can see each other clearly. One person starts as the “leader” and performs slow, simple movements using different parts of the body- arms, head, torso, or steps in place. The rest of the group mirrors the movements as closely as possible, focusing on observation rather than perfection.

After 1–2 minutes, the role of leader changes and someone else takes over. Over time, everyone has a chance to lead and follow. The facilitator encourages participants to use different qualities of movement, such as fast/slow, light/heavy, or big/small, but without pressure or strict rules.

To make it more creative, music can be added (but be aware of intellectual rights), or the group can be invited to connect movements into short “pictures,” where each new leader builds on the previous idea. Variations can also include working in pairs instead of a circle.

This exercise is inclusive because it does not require prior dance experience, supports individual leadership skills, different physical abilities, and values creativity over technique. It builds focus, empathy, body awareness, and group connection, making it ideal for youth work and introductory contemporary dance sessions.

Reflection questions:

- What did you learn about you and your partner in this exercise?
- Would you like to change anything in your work together?
- How did you feel as a “leader”? And vice versa?



Easy



up to 30 minutes



No needed materials

Exercise: **“Moving together”**

This simple contemporary dance exercise helps young people explore creativity, body awareness, and group connection. It is suitable for all experience levels and requires no dance background. Using music is also good, but not obligatory.

Participants spread out in the space. Invite them to walk freely around the room at different speeds. When the facilitator calls out a word such as heavy, light, smooth, sharp, slow, or floating, participants change the quality of their movement to reflect that word.

After a few minutes, participants should find a partner. One person starts moving while the other observes and then adds one movement inspired by their partner. Together, they create a short sequence of 3–5 movements. Encourage them to use different body parts, levels (high, middle, low), and directions.

Pairs then join another pair and teach each other their sequences. The group combines the movements into a short dance and performs it for the rest of the participants.

Finish with a reflection circle:

- How did it feel to create movement?
- What was easy or challenging?
- How did cooperation influence the final dance?

This exercise promotes creativity, communication, confidence, active listening, and teamwork through movement.

At the end of this toolkit you have great sources for other drama/dance/NFE exercises and methods.



Easy to moderate



30 minutes



No needed materials

Exercise: **“Invisible threads”**

This exercise explores connection, empathy, and non-verbal communication through movement. Participants spread out in the space and begin walking freely. The facilitator invites them to imagine that invisible threads connect them to different people in the room. When they notice someone, they respond with a simple movement inspired by that person’s energy, direction, speed, or posture.

Gradually, participants begin creating movement dialogues without speaking. They can mirror, complement, or contrast another person's movement. The facilitator introduces different prompts such as: “Move as if the thread is pulling you closer,” “Move as if the thread becomes heavier,” or “Move as if the thread suddenly disappears.”

In the next phase, participants form small groups and create a short movement sequence showing how people connect, separate, support, or influence one another. The focus is not on technical dance skills but on observation, creativity, and expression. Movements can be simple and adapted to all physical abilities, including seated participation.

The exercise develops body awareness, cooperation, active listening, creativity, and emotional intelligence. During the reflection, participants discuss how it felt to communicate without words, what made them feel connected to others, and how movement can express relationships that are sometimes difficult to explain verbally.

Tip: participants can use a piece of rope if they have issue to imagine those threads.



Easy to moderate



40 minutes



As needed but not necessary

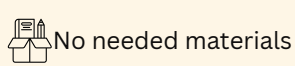
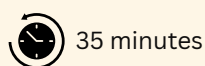
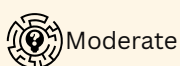
Exercise: **“Movement landscapes”**

Participants are invited to imagine that the room is a changing landscape. The facilitator names different environments such as a windy field, a crowded city, deep water, a mountain path, or a desert. Participants explore how their bodies would move through each environment, focusing on qualities of movement rather than realistic acting. They can experiment with speed, balance, levels, direction, and use of space.

After exploring individually, participants work in groups of 3–5. Each group chooses three landscapes and creates a short movement journey that transitions between them. They are encouraged to use simple contemporary dance principles such as flowing movement, pauses, changes of level, and group formations.

Of course, no dance experience is required, and movements can be adapted for participants with different physical abilities. The facilitator may introduce additional challenges, such as moving without using words, ensuring everyone contributes an idea, or creating one moment where the whole group moves as a single organism. Groups can then share their movement journeys with the rest of the participants if they want.

The exercise promotes imagination, creativity, teamwork, body awareness, and confidence in self-expression and also can be introductory to different topics: ecological, nature, activism etc. During reflection, participants discuss how different environments influenced their movement choices and how they collaborated to transform individual ideas into a collective artistic creation. The activity highlights that contemporary dance is about exploration and communication rather than perfect technique.



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*Modern dance refers to a specific dance movement that emerged in the early 20th century (Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, etc.), with its own established techniques and principles that challenged classical ballet.

Contemporary dance is a later, more open and evolving form (from mid-late 20th century onward) that builds on modern dance but has no fixed technique. It mixes styles, includes improvisation, and often blends influences from theatre, urban dance, and other movement practices.





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