

## Teaching Ontology in the Performing Arts: An Ethno-Epistemic Pedagogical Framework to Postgraduate Study

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### Abstract

This article proposes an ethno-epistemic approach to teaching ontology in the performing arts at the postgraduate level. Ontology is often introduced to students as an abstract philosophical concern, detached from artistic practice and cultural experience. This article reframes ontology as an interpretive inquiry grounded in cultural knowledge, embodied encounters, and reflective analysis. Drawing on scholarship in the anthropology of knowledge, cultural cognition, linguistics, and adult learning theory, the article develops a pedagogical approach that treats students' cultural backgrounds, artistic lineages, and experiential histories as epistemic resources rather than contextual noise. The discussion does not present an empirical evaluation of learning outcomes. Instead, it offers a theoretically informed articulation of course design, assignment structure, and reflective sequencing that operationalize ethno-epistemic principles in teaching practice. Ontological understanding is framed as emerging through cycles of observation, field-based engagement, analytical writing, and formative feedback. These pedagogical processes support students in identifying and interrogating the cultural assumptions that shape how performance meaning, action, and presence are interpreted. The article positions the proposed approach as context-dependent and provisional rather than universally generalizable. Its contribution lies in clarifying how ontological inquiry can be pedagogically organized in culturally diverse postgraduate settings, where performance traditions carry distinct epistemic and ontological logics. The ethno-epistemic approach advances discussions in performing arts pedagogy by shifting ontology from a static conceptual domain toward a culturally situated practice of interpretation.

*Keywords:* Cultural epistemology, ethno-epistemic pedagogy, ontology in the performing arts, performance analysis, postgraduate performing arts education, reflective and experiential learning

### Introduction

Ontology occupies a central position in the study of the performing arts, yet it is frequently taught as an abstract philosophical concern, disconnected from the cultural, embodied, and epistemic conditions through which performance practices are produced and understood. Concepts such as being, action, presence, and intention are often introduced as stable analytical categories, inviting students to engage with them as universal terms rather than as culturally situated constructs. This mode of instruction risks obscuring how ontological understanding in performance is shaped by historically specific knowledge systems, linguistic structures, and embodied traditions. For students working across diverse performance contexts, this abstraction can create a

disjunction between philosophical discourse and lived artistic experience, limiting their capacity to analyse performance in culturally grounded ways.

Recent scholarship across anthropology and cultural epistemology challenges the assumption that ontological categories operate independently of culture. Research in the anthropology of knowledge demonstrates that what is recognised as meaningful existence or action is inseparable from culturally constituted systems of interpretation (Spiro, 1986; Barth, 2002). Studies of cognition further show that analytical habits, including categorisation, comparison, and problem-solving, develop through interaction with culturally specific environments and modes of learning (Mishra, 2001). Linguistic inquiry extends this position by illustrating how language shapes epistemology and social ontology, generating the interpretive categories through which reality is apprehended rather than merely described (Ejjebli, 2023). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that ontology in the performing arts cannot be treated as a neutral or universal analytical domain but must be understood as emerging from culturally mediated ways of knowing and interpreting embodied practice.

Despite these insights, pedagogical models for teaching ontology in the performing arts rarely address the cultural and epistemic positioning of learners explicitly. Postgraduate students bring with them accumulated interpretive frameworks shaped by prior training, artistic lineages, and cultural experience, yet these frameworks often remain unexamined within conventional curricula. Adult learning theory highlights the importance of reflection and critical examination of assumptions in enabling learners to reconstruct their understanding (Boud & Walker, 1991; Mezirow, 1990, 1998). However, existing pedagogical approaches seldom integrate these principles systematically into the teaching of ontology as an analytic practice. This article responds to this gap by proposing an ethno-epistemic pedagogical framework for teaching ontology in the performing arts. Drawing on scholarship in the anthropology of knowledge, cultural epistemology, and adult learning, the article reframes ontology as a culturally situated mode of inquiry and articulates how this understanding can inform course design, assignment structure, and reflective practice at postgraduate level.

## Literature Review

### Ontology as an Ethno-Epistemic Inquiry

Studying ontology in the performing arts requires careful attention to how communities organize experience, classify action, and assign meaning to embodied practices. Ontological concepts such as being, action, intention, and presence do not operate as universal analytical categories. They emerge from cultural systems that shape how the world is perceived and interpreted. Students often encounter ontology as a philosophical abstraction, detached from performance practice. Ontological inquiry becomes pedagogically meaningful only when learners recognize that these categories are grounded in culturally specific logics rather than existing as neutral analytical tools. This shift requires reframing ontology as an inquiry into how cultural knowledge structures the very conditions of meaning in performance.

Anthropology offers a critical foundation for this reframing. Spiro (1986) argues that cultural frameworks fundamentally influence how individuals organize experience and interpret reality, challenging the assumption that conceptual categories travel across contexts without transformation. His critique underscores that symbolic systems shape what counts as meaningful action within a given cultural setting. Mishra (2001) extends this position through research on cognition across cultures, demonstrating that categorization, comparison, and problem-solving strategies develop through interaction with culturally specific environments, lifestyles, and educational practices. For students of performance, this insight clarifies why interpretive practices such as identifying motifs, analyzing intention, or attributing agency differ across traditions. Analytical choices are not simply methodological preferences but reflect culturally learned cognitive patterns.

Language further mediates ontological understanding. Ejjebli (2023) demonstrates that linguistic structures actively shape epistemology and social ontology, generating interpretive categories rather than merely naming pre-existing realities. This has direct implications for performance studies, where terms such as gesture, rhythm, presence, and ritual carry culturally embedded assumptions. Students begin to recognize the limits of their inherited analytical vocabularies when encountering movement systems grounded in different linguistic and cultural worlds. Barth (2002) reinforces this perspective by arguing that knowledge is culturally

produced and historically situated, filtered through traditions that generate distinct worldviews. Ontological interpretation, therefore, cannot be separated from the epistemic environments that shape what individuals recognize as meaningful, valuable, or real. Understanding ontology in performance thus becomes an inquiry into how cultural knowledge organizes the categories through which embodied action is analyzed. This position forms the conceptual basis of the ethno-epistemic pedagogical framework developed in this article, where ontology is approached as a culturally mediated process rather than a universal philosophical abstraction.

### **Pedagogical Foundations for Ontological Inquiry**

Postgraduate learners enter the study of ontology with accumulated experiences shaped by culture, performative training, and artistic practice. These experiences influence what they notice in performance and how they construct meaning from embodied action. Teaching ontology therefore requires a pedagogical foundation that recognizes learners as ‘culturally situated interpreters’ rather than ‘passive recipients of philosophical concepts. Ontological inquiry at this level depends on pedagogies that foreground reflexivity, experience, and critical engagement with prior assumptions, particularly when students work across diverse performance traditions.

Adult learning theory provides a relevant foundation for this orientation. Boud and Walker (1991) argue that learning from experience involves processes of noticing, questioning, and re-evaluating prior understandings rather than simply acquiring new information. Their work shifts pedagogical attention toward how learners reconstruct meaning through reflection on experience. This perspective aligns closely with the demands of ontological inquiry in performance studies, where students must interrogate how cultural knowledge informs their interpretations of movement, presence, and intention. Mezirow’s theory of critical reflection further strengthens this position. He distinguishes between surface-level cognition and deeper forms of learning that occur when individuals examine the assumptions that structure their interpretations (Mezirow, 1990, 1998). For ontology, this distinction is crucial, as students must learn to question not only what they observe in performance but also the epistemic categories through which observation itself is organized.

Assessment and feedback practices also shape how students engage with ontological questions. Gibbs and Simpson (2005) demonstrate that assessment strongly influences students’ learning strategies, directing attention toward forms of engagement. In the context of this framework, assignment-based assessment is designed to encourage interpretive depth rather than descriptive reporting. Students are required to articulate how cultural logics shape meaning within specific performance contexts. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2004) add that formative feedback supports learners’ capacity for self-regulation and analytical judgement. Feedback functions here as a dialogic process through which students test, refine, and clarify their interpretations, making visible the cultural assumptions embedded in their analytical choices.

The ethno-epistemic orientation of this pedagogical framework is further reinforced through culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2002, 2018) argues that learners’ cultural experiences should be treated as intellectual resources rather than obstacles to academic engagement. This position aligns directly with the aims of teaching ontology in culturally diverse postgraduate cohorts. Students’ artistic lineages, fieldwork experiences, and linguistic repertoires become integral to how they understand embodiment and meaning in performance. Williams (2001) highlights the role of reflective practice in facilitating movement from descriptive accounts toward more analytically grounded interpretations. Reflection is therefore positioned not as a supplementary learning activity, but as an epistemic practice central to ontological inquiry, enabling students to trace how their interpretations are shaped by cultural positioning, disciplinary habits, and personal experience. Together, these bodies of literature establish the theoretical and pedagogical conditions for an ethno-epistemic approach to teaching ontology in the performing arts.

### **Tools and Methodological Positioning**

This article adopts a conceptual, practice-informed methodological orientation rather than an empirical research design. It does not seek to measure learning outcomes, evaluate instructional effectiveness, or compare student cohorts. Instead, it addresses a pedagogical problem at the level of conceptual design and epistemic orientation, asking how ontology in the performing arts may be taught in ways that foreground cultural positioning,

interpretive awareness, and reflexive inquiry. Framing the study in this way clarifies the scope of its claims and responds directly to concerns about methodological transparency within pedagogical research contexts. The ethno-epistemic approach articulated here is informed by the author's prior ethnographic engagement with Malay performance traditions, particularly fieldwork on Main Zapin practices in Johor. That research documented how ontological meanings in performance emerge through culturally organized movement systems, social relations, and embodied knowledge rather than through abstract analytical categories (Hamza, 2023). These ethnographic insights function as conceptual grounding, informing how ontology is framed pedagogically while maintaining critical distance from claims of instructional efficacy. The present article therefore positions ethnographic experience as a source of epistemic sensitivity that shapes pedagogical thinking, while remaining focused on articulating a theoretically grounded approach to postgraduate teaching rather than reporting evaluated outcomes.

The primary materials informing this study consist of course design decisions, assignment structures, and reflective pedagogical practices developed through sustained engagement with postgraduate teaching in the performing arts. These materials are treated not as data in the empirical sense, but as sites of pedagogical reasoning through which theoretical principles are translated into instructional form. The analytical process involves synthesizing insights from anthropology, cultural epistemology, and adult learning theory, and examining how these insights can be operationalized within curriculum design, sequencing of learning activities, and modes of assessment. The focus is on conceptual coherence and pedagogical logic rather than empirical verification.

Analytically, the study proceeds through theoretical synthesis and pedagogical articulation. Concepts drawn from the anthropology of knowledge and cultural epistemology inform the framing of ontology as a culturally mediated inquiry. Adult and experiential learning theories guide the structuring of reflective tasks, assessment practices, and feedback processes. The resulting ethno-epistemic pedagogical framework is therefore not derived from data analysis but from iterative alignment between theory and teaching practice, where pedagogical choices are explicitly grounded in established scholarship. Figures presented in the article function as conceptual maps that clarify relationships between ontology, epistemology, culture, and pedagogy, rather than as representations of analytical findings.

The limitations of this methodological positioning must be acknowledged. The framework is context-dependent, shaped by specific institutional, cultural, and curricular conditions, and does not claim universal applicability. Its pedagogical claims are theoretical and provisional, intended to offer a structured way of thinking about ontology teaching rather than a validated model of best practice. Further empirical studies, including classroom-based research or comparative pedagogical analysis, would be required to assess how such a framework functions across different contexts and student populations. The article positions itself as a conceptual contribution to performing arts pedagogy, offering a framework for reflection, adaptation, and future investigation rather than a prescriptive or evaluative methodology.

### **The Ethno-Epistemic Pedagogical Framework**

The ethno-epistemic pedagogical framework articulated in this article translates the preceding theoretical and pedagogical discussions into a structured way of thinking about how ontology may be taught in postgraduate performing arts education. The framework does not function as a teaching method, instructional recipe, or evaluative model. Rather, it serves as a conceptual and pedagogical heuristic that organises relationships between cultural epistemology, reflective learning processes, and ontological inquiry. Its purpose is to clarify how pedagogical design can foreground students' cultural positioning and interpretive responsibility when engaging with ontological questions arising from performance practice.

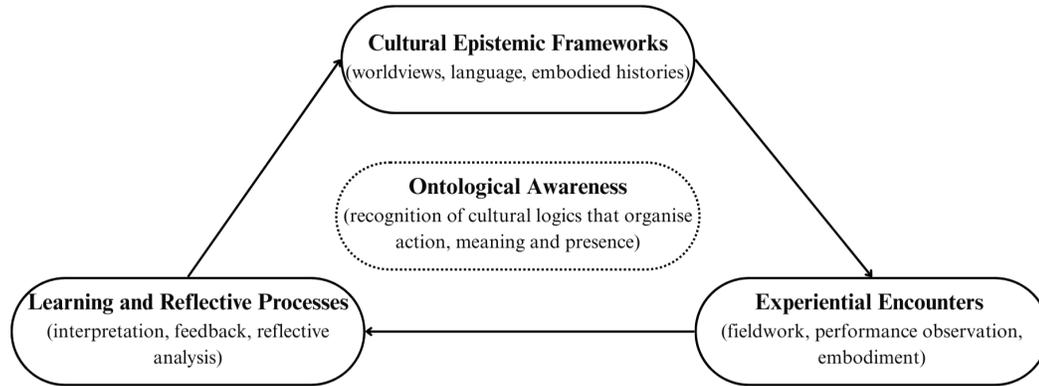


Figure 1. Triadic Ethno-Epistemic framework that conceptualizes the relationship between cultural epistemic frameworks and ontological awareness.

Figure 1 illustrates how worldviews, linguistic categories, and embodied histories shape the conditions under which ontological awareness becomes possible. The diagram should be read as a relational map, not as a causal or developmental model. It does not suggest that ontological awareness emerges automatically from cultural frameworks, nor does it imply a measurable learning outcome. Instead, it visualizes the conceptual premise that ontological understanding in performance is always mediated by culturally situated ways of knowing.

Pedagogically, the framework emphasizes iterative movement between experience, reflection, and analysis. Students engage with performance through observation, fieldwork, or embodied participation, and are guided to reflect on how meaning is produced within specific cultural contexts. Reflection is positioned as an ‘epistemic practice’ through which students identify assumptions embedded in their interpretive habits, rather than as a technique for personal introspection alone. Ontological inquiry, in this sense, unfolds through sustained engagement with cultural logics rather than through the application of predefined theoretical categories.

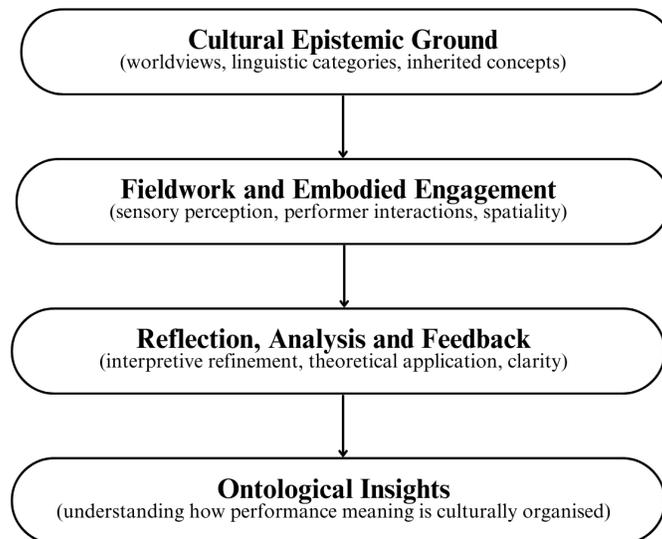


Figure 2. Assignment cycle for ontological development: Presents an idealized pedagogical sequencing from cultural epistemic ground to ontological insights.

Figure 2 represents a conceptual sequencing of pedagogical emphasis, moving from inherited epistemic frameworks through embodied engagement and reflective analysis toward articulated ontological understanding. The vertical structure is not intended to represent a universal learning trajectory or a guaranteed progression. Instead, it offers a simplified visualization of how pedagogical attention may be organized when teaching ontology as a culturally situated inquiry. Students may move between these stages non-linearly, revisiting earlier stages as their interpretive understanding develops.

Assignment design constitutes a central operational element of the framework. Rather than assessing mastery of philosophical terminology, assignments are structured to require students to articulate how meaning, action, and presence are organized within specific performance traditions. Formative feedback supports this process by encouraging clarification, refinement, and reconsideration of analytical assumptions. Assessment is therefore positioned as a site of inquiry and dialogue rather than as a mechanism for measuring pedagogical effectiveness.

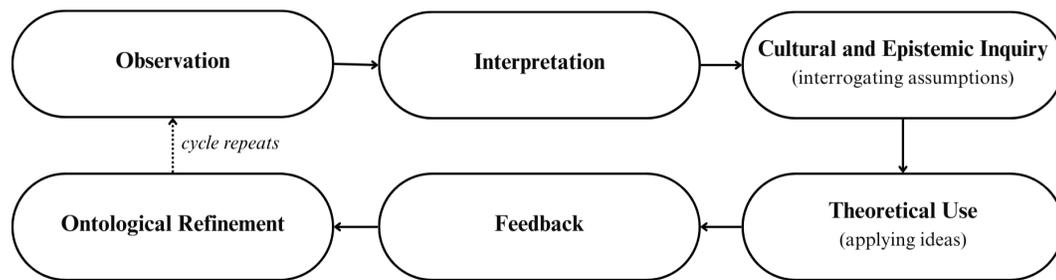


Figure 3. Ethno-epistemic structure: Illustrates the iterative cycle of observation, interpretation, cultural and epistemic inquiry, theoretical use, feedback, and ontological refinement.

Figure 3 emphasizes the non-final and recursive nature of ontological understanding. The repeated cycle signals that ontological insight is provisional and subject to revision as students encounter new cultural contexts, theoretical perspectives, or embodied experiences. The diagram functions as a heuristic for interpretive refinement rather than as a representation of instructional efficiency or learning gain.

Taken together, the three figures operate as conceptual supports that clarify the internal logic of the ethno-epistemic pedagogical framework. They are not derived from empirical data, nor do they claim to represent measured learning processes or outcomes. Instead, they visualize how ontology, epistemology, culture, and pedagogy are conceptually aligned within this framework. This explicit positioning ensures that the framework is understood as a reflective and adaptable pedagogical proposal, open to contextual modification and future empirical examination rather than a prescriptive or validated teaching model.

### Discussion: Implications for Postgraduate Pedagogy

The ethno-epistemic pedagogical framework reframes the teaching of ontology in the performing arts as a culturally situated and interpretive process shaped by epistemic histories, lived encounters, and reflective analysis. Recent pedagogical scholarship indicates a growing interest in ontological perspectives within education, including the scoping review by Nijenhuis et al. (2025), which documents the uptake of object-oriented ontology in educational research aimed at unsettling anthropocentric assumptions. Although the present article adopts a cultural and relational orientation rather than an object-oriented one, this broader trend suggests that ontology is increasingly recognized as a productive lens for rethinking pedagogical foundations. The contribution of the present framework lies not in advancing a singular ontological position, but in clarifying how ontological inquiry may be pedagogically organized within culturally diverse postgraduate contexts. The framework is therefore presented as a situated articulation rather than a universally generalizable model.

A key pedagogical implication of this framework is the repositioning of learning as an active interpretive process. Drawing on Boud and Walker (1991), learning is understood to deepen when students reconstruct their interpretive frameworks rather than accumulate conceptual knowledge. Within this model,

students are guided to identify the assumptions that shape how they interpret movement, presence, and relationality, and to recognize that these assumptions arise from culturally specific logics rather than abstract universals. Barth's (2002) argument that knowledge is culturally produced further reinforces this position. Cultural experience is treated not as background context but as an epistemic resource, enabling students to examine how meaning is organized within different performance traditions. However, this emphasis also introduces pedagogical tension, as students may differ in their readiness to critically examine their own epistemic positioning, particularly when such positioning is deeply tied to identity or artistic lineage.

Fieldwork and embodied engagement amplify both the potential and the limits of this approach. Alou (2016) and Barrett (2007) demonstrate that knowledge produced through lived and embodied encounters differs qualitatively from knowledge derived through textual study alone. When students encounter performance within community contexts, they gain access to relational, affective, and spatial dimensions that shape how ontology operates in practice. These encounters support more nuanced understanding of how performance traditions conceptualize being, action, and presence. At the same time, such engagements are context-dependent and uneven, shaped by access, duration, and the relational dynamics between researchers and communities. As a result, the depth of ontological insight generated through fieldwork cannot be assumed to be uniform across cohorts or settings.

Reflection functions as a central mechanism for integrating experience and analysis within the framework. Williams (2001) and Leberman and Martin (2004) show that structured reflection enables learners to move beyond descriptive accounts toward more analytically grounded interpretations. In the present framework, reflective writing allows students to trace shifts in their interpretive understanding across assignments and encounters, making visible how cultural assumptions are challenged and revised. Nevertheless, reflective practices also carry pedagogical risks, including over-intellectualization or uneven depth of engagement among students. Reflection therefore requires careful scaffolding and feedback to function as an epistemic practice rather than a purely narrative exercise.

Assessment design plays a decisive role in shaping how students engage with ontological inquiry. Gibbs and Simpson (2005) and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2004) argue that staged assignments and formative feedback support deeper engagement when assessment aligns with learning objectives. Within this framework, assignments are designed to require explicit articulation of interpretive reasoning rather than demonstration of conceptual mastery. Feedback supports analytical refinement and helps students identify how cultural assumptions inform their conclusions. However, this assessment structure prioritizes interpretive depth over standardization, which may present challenges in contexts where uniform evaluation criteria are institutionally required.

The framework also aligns with broader commitments to culturally responsive pedagogy. Gay (2002, 2018) argues that cultural experience should be central to learning rather than marginalized. This alignment supports the framework's emphasis on treating students' cultural identities, artistic histories, and linguistic repertoires as analytical resources. At the same time, such positioning demands pedagogical sensitivity, as not all students may be equally willing or able to mobilize cultural identity within academic analysis. The framework therefore requires careful facilitation to avoid essentializing culture or placing unintended burdens on learners.

Taken together, these implications position the ethno-epistemic pedagogical framework as a reflective and provisional contribution to postgraduate performing arts education. It does not resolve the challenges of teaching ontology across diverse contexts, nor does it claim pedagogical effectiveness. Instead, it clarifies how ontological inquiry may be structured as a culturally situated, reflexive process responsive to the complexity of performance practice. The framework invites adaptation, critique, and empirical exploration, reinforcing the view that ontology in the performing arts must remain attentive to cultural difference, embodied knowledge, and the limits of pedagogical design.

## **Conclusion**

This article has articulated an ethno-epistemic approach to teaching ontology in the performing arts at the postgraduate level. The approach responds to a recurring pedagogical difficulty, where students encounter ontology as an abstract philosophical discourse disconnected from artistic practice and cultural experience.

Rather than resolving this difficulty through conceptual simplification, the approach reframes ontology as an interpretive practice grounded in cultural knowledge, embodied encounters, and reflective analysis. Ontology is presented not as a universal set of categories, but as a mode of inquiry shaped by the cultural, linguistic, and epistemic systems through which performance is understood.

The theoretical discussions drawn from anthropology, cultural cognition, linguistics, and adult learning theory support this reframing. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that ontological categories emerge through culturally mediated processes of interpretation rather than neutral observation. From this standpoint, students' cultural backgrounds, artistic lineages, and embodied histories are not peripheral influences on ontological inquiry. They constitute the very conditions through which meaning is organized and made intelligible. Teaching ontology therefore requires pedagogical strategies that render these conditions visible and open to critical examination.

The course design and assignment structure described in this article operationalize these insights through iterative cycles of observation, analysis, and reflection. Assignments function as analytical instruments that prompt students to examine how meaning is produced within performance traditions and how their own interpretive assumptions shape this process. Formative feedback supports this work by encouraging reflexive clarification rather than conceptual closure. Fieldwork and embodied engagement extend learning beyond the classroom, allowing students to encounter ontological structures as lived and relational realities organized through movement, ritual, and social interaction. These encounters highlight the sensory and affective dimensions of ontology that remain inaccessible through textual study alone.

At the same time, the approach outlined here must be understood as context-dependent and provisional. It does not claim empirical validation or universal applicability across all postgraduate settings. Its effectiveness is shaped by institutional conditions, cohort composition, access to fieldwork contexts, and the pedagogical capacity to facilitate culturally sensitive reflection. The model therefore does not resolve the challenges of teaching ontology in the performing arts. Instead, it offers a structured way of thinking through how ontological inquiry may be pedagogically organised in contexts where performance knowledge is culturally diverse and epistemically situated.

In this sense, the contribution of the article lies in clarifying a pedagogical orientation rather than establishing a definitive teaching model. The ethno-epistemic approach positions ontology as an interpretive process responsive to cultural difference, embodied knowledge, and reflective practice. It invites further empirical investigation, adaptation, and critique. More broadly, it contributes to ongoing conversations about how ontology can be taught in ways that acknowledge performance as a culturally organised system of meaning, and pedagogy as a site where epistemic assumptions are not only transmitted but actively examined.

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