

## Participatory Mentoring in the Creation of Thai Dance Thesis: A Case Study of “The Legend of Rak Long Khu”

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the efficacy of participatory mentoring in the development of senior Thai dance theses, specifically through the case study of "The Legend of Rak Long Khu." The primary objectives are to establish a pedagogical framework for participatory advising, evaluate the process through practice-based reflection, and propose a model that fosters students' artistic identity and self-efficacy. By integrating three core concepts reflective practice, safe space, and participatory mentoring this study examines the collaborative dynamics between advisors and students in choreography, set design, and lighting. The findings demonstrate that a supportive, non-hierarchical environment encourages deeper inquiry and innovation. Furthermore, the results indicate that this mentoring model enhances students' sense of ownership and clarifies their artistic identities, ultimately yielding performances that successfully synthesize Thai traditional elements with contemporary Western techniques.

**Keywords:** Participatory mentoring, Thai dance, Reflective practice, Safe space, Arts education

### Introduction

In the landscape of advanced Thai dance education, the senior thesis represents a critical pedagogical milestone. It serves as a rigorous platform for students to demonstrate artistic proficiency by articulating personal narratives, emotional depth, and culturally informed interpretations through creative praxis. However, the formulation of these theses has become increasingly complex, particularly as contemporary students endeavor to synthesize Western theatrical paradigms with traditional Thai dance a discipline deeply rooted in ritualistic heritage and rigid conventions. In this evolving context, the role of the academic advisor must transcend conventional administrative oversight. The advisor functions as a facilitator of both intellectual and emotional development, accompanying students through a multifaceted creative journey that often challenges traditional academic frameworks.

To foster genuine artistic maturation, it is imperative to cultivate a pedagogical environment that prioritizes creative agency over standardized outcomes. When advisors engage in collaborative inquiry and utilize open-ended, reflective questioning, students are empowered to engage in deep metacognition. This strategy not only refines their artistic expression but also bolsters their professional self-efficacy and individual identity. Such a "safe space" for intellectual exploration is essential to produce innovative and authentic art, allowing students to navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity without the fear of academic repositioning.

This article examines the conceptual frameworks and practical methodologies employed to support students in their Thai dance senior theses, specifically through the case study of the production "The Legend of Rak Long Khu." This performance exemplifies a sophisticated integration of Western scenography including symbolic set designs and multimedia elements with contemporary re-interpretations of Thai classical movements.

Drawing from the author's direct experience as an academic advisor, this article offers a reflective analysis aimed at proposing a transformative mentoring model. The discussion is organized into four key areas: first, an exploration of the theoretical foundations of participatory mentoring; second, a detailed description of the case study's artistic synthesis; third, an analysis of the five-step advisory process; and finally, a synthesis of the findings regarding student identity formation. This approach emphasizes open-mindedness and collaborative decision-making, providing a new trajectory for fostering individual artistic expression within the framework of Thai dance education.

### **Research objectives**

This article aims to:

1. To establish a pedagogical framework and techniques for participatory advising in Thai dance thesis projects.
2. To examine the advising process through practice-based reflection.
3. To propose a mentoring model that supports students in developing their artistic identities and self-assurance in a higher education context.

### **Research methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing a case study approach centered on the production of "The Legend of Rak Long Khu." To ensure academic rigor and address the complexities of artistic creation, the methodology is structured as follows:

#### **1. Data Collection and Research Instruments**

Data were triangulated across multiple sources to enhance credibility and analytical depth. The following instruments and techniques were employed:

(1) In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with student creators, including choreographers, set designers, and lighting designers. These interviews explored participants' creative decision-making processes and examined the influence of the mentoring approach on their artistic development.

(2) Participant Observation: The researchers assumed the role of mentors and engaged in participant observation throughout rehearsals, design consultations, and the final performance. Detailed field notes were systematically documented to capture collaborative interactions and creative dynamics.

(3) Documentary Analysis and Reflective Logs: Students' creative journals and technical design drafts were examined to trace the progression of their artistic projects from initial conceptualization through final realization.

#### **2. Research Procedure: Participatory Mentoring Process**

The mentoring process was guided by a three-phase reflective cycle:

(1) Ideation Phase: A supportive and non-evaluative environment was established to encourage students to propose unconventional ideas without concern for academic judgment or penalty.

(2) Collaborative Execution Phase: Advisors and students collaborated closely on technical components, particularly lighting and set design. During this phase, the advisor's role shifted from that of an evaluator to a co-creator, fostering shared authorship in the creative process.

(3) Reflective Synthesis Phase: Following the performance, structured reflective discussions were conducted in which mentors and students jointly analyzed the creative outcomes. These discussions emphasized the influence of participatory mentoring on the formation of the final artistic identity.

#### **3. Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with particular attention to the intersection of reflective practice and participatory mentoring. This analytical approach facilitated the

identification of recurring patterns in student development and provided insight into the effectiveness of the proposed pedagogical framework.

### Theoretical Framework

This article draws upon three key theoretical frameworks to analyze and articulate the process of thesis advising:

#### 1. Participatory Mentoring

This concept emphasizes an open, collaborative relationship between advisor and student, rather than a top-down, authoritative model. It involves shared decision-making, dialogic interaction, and mutual respect for the student’s individual identity and creative voice.

#### 2. Reflective Practice

Reflective practice encourages advisors to engage in continuous self-reflection grounded in real-life experiences. This approach supports the development of context-specific knowledge that emerges organically from the advising process.

#### 3. Safety Space

This concept underscores the importance of creating a space in which students feel free to express their ideas and emotions without fear of judgment. A psychologically safe environment fosters creativity, experimentation, and personal growth, especially essential in artistic disciplines.

By integrating these three frameworks, the advising process in the senior thesis course becomes more profound, flexible, and responsive to the unique context of each student within the field of contemporary performing arts.

While the conceptual framework is grounded in participatory mentoring, reflective practice, and the notion of safety space, it also engages with contemporary discussions in arts education and creative pedagogy that emphasize learner-centered, relational, and practice-based approaches. Recent debates in arts education highlight the importance of emotional safety, co-creation, and identity formation as integral components of artistic learning, particularly in higher education contexts.

By situating participatory mentoring within these ongoing scholarly conversations, this study positions the advising process not merely as instructional support, but as a pedagogical practice that responds to contemporary challenges in dance education and creative thesis supervision.

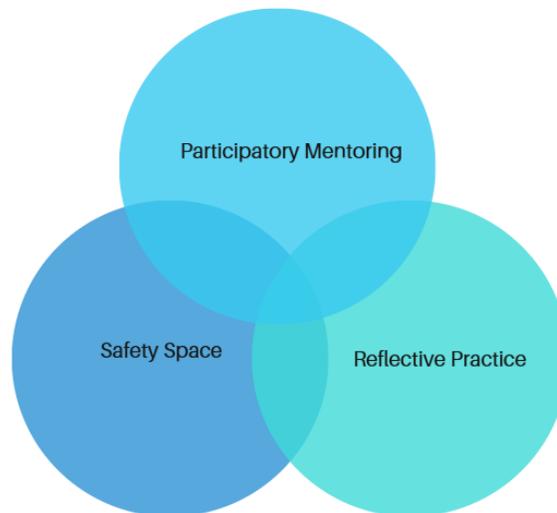


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

### **Case Study: The Legend of Rak Long Khu**

The senior thesis performance, "The Legend of Rak Long Khu," is a contemporary Thai dance production that reinterprets a historical tragedy through a modern choreographic lens. The piece explores the complexities of identity and sociocultural values in Thailand, specifically focusing on the marginalized narratives of same-sex relationships and gender identity.

The production is inspired by the real-life account of Mr. Somchai "Cheep" Kaewchinda and Mr. Pranote "Sida" Wisetpaet a transgender woman whose tragic romance became a legendary tale of devotion and fatality, often referred to as "The Legend of the Twin Coffins at Wat Hua Lamphong." Central to the performance is the conceptual exploration of the couple's sacred vow made at Wat Phra Kaew and the Bangkok City Pillar Shrine. This oath of eternal fidelity, which culminated in their mutual demise, serves as the emotional and philosophical foundation for the choreography, symbolizing the tension between profound love and the inevitability of tragedy.

"Rak Long Khu" represents a significant pedagogical achievement in the Thai Dance major at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. The performance achieves a sophisticated synthesis of traditional Thai classical dance utilizing intricate hand gestures (Jeeb) and formal ensemble structures with the fluid, expressive vocabulary of Western modern dance.

Beyond the choreography, the production integrates advanced scenography and multimedia elements to enhance the narrative depth. The stage design employs symbolic abstraction, while the lighting design is utilized as a psychological tool to mirror the internal emotional states of the characters. This project exemplifies the successful integration of interdisciplinary knowledge, demonstrating the ability of undergraduate researchers to bridge the gap between traditional heritage and contemporary theatrical techniques.

### **Advisory Process and Pedagogical Approach**

The mentoring framework employed in this study is anchored in the principles of participatory engagement, reflective practice, and the cultivation of a psychologically safe environment. This multi-dimensional approach shifts the role of the advisor from a conventional authority figure to a facilitator of intellectual growth.

#### **1. Participatory Mentoring: Opening Intellectual Spaces**

The core philosophy of this mentoring model centers on "opening intellectual space," a concept that prioritizes the student's unique creative potential and artistic identity. In this paradigm, the mentor refrains from prescribing definitive "correct" or "incorrect" answers. Instead, the mentor functions as a facilitator who encourages students to engage in critical reflection through systematic inquiry.

**Strategic Questioning and Conceptual Crystallization:** Open-ended questions serve as the primary instrument for stimulating cognitive engagement. This technique allows students to articulate their artistic intentions and rationales without the constraints of an advisor's preconceived notions.

**General Inquiry:** Questions such as "Could you elucidate the rationale behind selecting this specific stage element?" prompt broad reflection.

**Semiotic Inquiry:** More targeted questions, such as "What is the symbolic significance of the white mesh in these costumes?" encourage students to engage in semiotic and interpretive analysis.

These inquiries are not evaluative tests of knowledge but are designed to foster conceptual crystallization a process of explanation and elaboration that connects the artistic work with the student's personal perspective. Furthermore, the advisor utilizes reflective feedback rather than immediate judgment. By presenting alternative viewpoints or comparative examples, the mentor enables students to make informed, autonomous decisions, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy and professional agency.

#### **2. Reflective Practice: Transitioning to Specialized Competence**

Following the 2023 curriculum revision for the senior creative project in the Thai Classical Dance major, the pedagogical structure shifted from collective group projects to specialized individual

assessments. This transition requires students to demonstrate mastery in specific domains, such as choreography, set design, or lighting control.

In the case study of "The Legend of Rak Long Khu," the researcher served as an academic advisor to four specialized students (two in set design, one in lighting, and one in choreography). The advisory strategy focused on ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the production process through practice-based reflection.

**Reflective Questioning:** The advisor utilized prompts like "What informed the structural composition of this work?" to compel students to revisit and defend their creative logic.

**Experiential Learning:** When technical ambiguities arose, the advisor provided contextual explanations and encouraged hands-on experimentation. This approach allowed students to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical execution, fostering a deeper, experiential understanding of their respective crafts.

### **3. Establishing a "Safe Space": Emotional and Relational Dynamics**

The creation of a senior thesis in Thai classical dance is a high-stakes endeavor that involves significant psychological pressure. Consequently, the establishment of a "Safe Space" is essential for both artistic and emotional development.

The researcher recognized that effective supervision must extend beyond technical critique to include the cultivation of mutual trust. This was achieved through an empathy-based communication strategy that acknowledges the students' humanity.

**Validating Communication:** Phrases that acknowledge the students' labor and emotional investment such as recognizing their sincerity and effort serve as deliberate expressions of care.

**Relational Shift:** By using warm, open-ended language, the advisor encourages students to articulate internal states such as anxiety or fatigue, which are frequently neglected in traditional academic settings.

This shift from a hierarchical relationship to one of mutual respect and emotional presence reduces performance-related stress and encourages honest dialogue. In this environment, students feel empowered to seek assistance and express uncertainty, ultimately evolving into resilient, self-aware artists who can navigate the complexities of the creative process with confidence.

## **Findings and Discussions**

The analysis of the "Rak Long Khu" case study reveals that the efficacy of the senior thesis process in performing arts is deeply contingent upon the relational dynamics between the academic advisor and the students. The findings are categorized into three primary dimensions:

### **1. Deconstruction of Hierarchical Power Distance**

A pivotal finding of this study is that the deliberate reduction of hierarchical power distance is essential for fostering a productive creative environment. This shift did not diminish the structural roles of the participants; rather, it transformed the advisor-student dynamic into an intellectual partnership.

**Mutual Recognition:** While students continued to respect the advisor's pedagogical expertise, the advisor conversely recognized the students' creative agency and ownership.

**Psychological Safety:** This egalitarian approach established a "safe space" that facilitated honest inquiry and risk-taking. Students reported that the absence of fear regarding immediate criticism allowed them to push the boundaries of traditional Thai dance, leading to more profound and multifaceted artistic outcomes.

### **2. Curricular Integration and Artistic Synthesis**

The production of "Rak Long Khu" functioned as a rigorous two-month experiential learning cycle. The process demanded a sophisticated synthesis of disparate theatrical traditions:

**Interdisciplinary Challenge:** Students were required to transcend the conventions of Thai classical dance by integrating Western theatrical elements, including dramaturgical research and Expressionist scenography.

**Conceptual Crystallization:** The extended duration of the project allowed for the systematic crystallization of ideas. The use of symbolic representation and psychological lighting was not merely aesthetic but served as a tool for deep communication, distinguishing the work from conventional performances.

**The Advisor as Facilitator:** The advisor’s role shifted from "gatekeeper" to learning facilitator. By utilizing reflective questioning (e.g., "How does this lighting choice amplify the character's internal conflict?"), the advisor prompted students to internalize their creative choices, fostering a sense of professional accountability and artistic identity.

### 3. Transformative Learning and Identity Formation

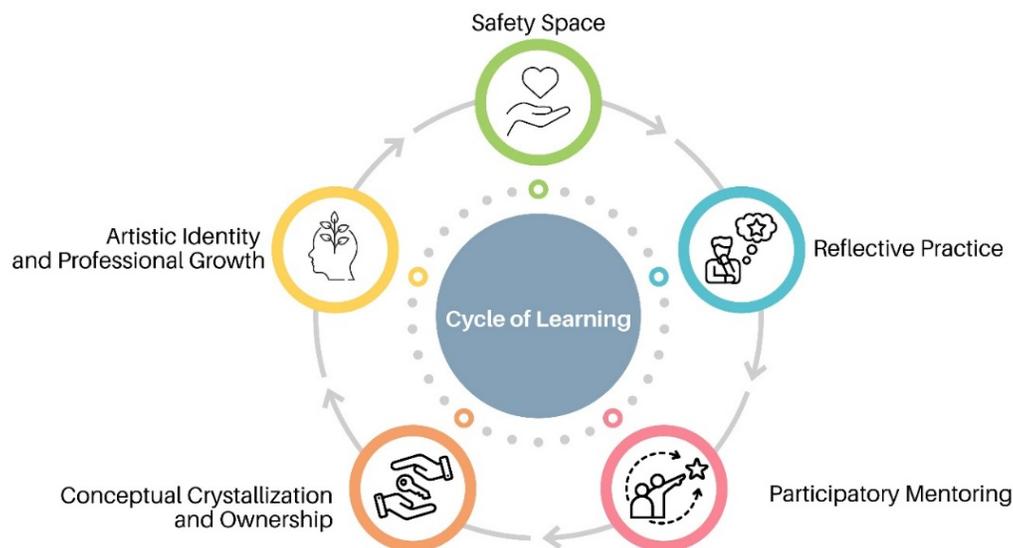
The findings suggest that the participatory mentoring model yields outcomes that extend beyond the final performance:

**Holistic Development:** The project functioned as a mechanism for cultivating independent artists capable of critical judgment. The integration of theoretical knowledge with practical execution resulted in a significant increase in student self-efficacy.

**Identity Affirmation:** Through the "safe learning space," students were able to discover and affirm their creative voices. They emerged not only as technically proficient performers but as resilient artists with a clear understanding of their position within the contemporary arts landscape.

In summary, the transition from a top-down instructional model to a participatory, reflective framework significantly enhances both the pedagogical process and the creative output. This model ensures that academic rigor is maintained while simultaneously nurturing the emotional and intellectual well-being of the student.

(Note: The researcher, acting as the academic advisor, has synthesized these findings into the visual framework provided in Figure [2].)



**Figure 2.** The 5-Step Learning Cycle for Counseling: Case Study “Rak Long Khu”

Based on the established visual framework, the researcher (as an academic advisor) delineates the five-stage participatory process employed in the production of "Rak Long Khu." This model transitions advising from simple knowledge transmission to a holistic developmental journey.

#### Step 1: Establishing the "Safe Space"

The foundation of this model lies in the deliberate construction of a psychological safe space. Central to this was a mutually constructed "working agreement" a co-designed protocol that empowered students to share responsibility in decision-making, such as scheduling and communication preferences.

By adopting a non-judgmental stance, the advisor reframed gaps in student knowledge as opportunities for inquiry rather than academic deficiencies. Communication was grounded in empathetic listening, which affirmed the students' artistic voices. Instead of didactic correction, the advisor utilized constructive feedback, ensuring students-maintained autonomy over their creative choices.

*"Our advisor demonstrated a genuine investment in our project. He actively prioritized our ideas and decisions, providing guidance that facilitated alignment without compromising our creative agency."* > (Student F, personal communication, September 10, 2025)

#### Step 2: Integrated Reflective Practice

Reflective practice was operationalized by allocating both physical and intellectual space for experiential learning. This phase moved beyond theoretical instruction to "learning-by-doing," where students were encouraged to experiment without the constraints of binary (right/wrong) evaluations.

*"Engaging in dialogue with my advisor provided a sense of security. He facilitated the refinement of my concepts and suggested strategic directions whenever the creative process lacked focus."* > (Student B, personal communication, September 01, 2025)

The provision of structured time allowed for metacognitive development, as students engaged in cycles of review and self-critique. Within this framework, technical errors were reframed as pedagogical catalysts for continuous improvement in problem-solving and time management.

#### Step 3: Participatory Mentoring and Co-learning

This step shifts the hierarchical paradigm to an egalitarian partnership. The advisor intentionally adopted the role of a co-learner, which significantly reduced power imbalances.

**Constructive Feedback:** Guidance focused on critical reflection and exploring alternative possibilities, honoring the student's creative voice.

**Emotional Empathy:** The advisor acknowledged the students as "whole human beings," validating their emotional states (fatigue, anxiety, or doubt) throughout the rigorous production cycle.

*"The advisor's openness to 'outside-the-box' thinking bolstered our confidence. His support served as a compass that allowed us to innovate with professional self-assurance."* > (Student B, personal communication, September 12, 2025)

#### Step 4: Conceptual Crystallization and Ownership

This stage focused on the integration of diverse performance vocabularies. Students from traditional Thai dance backgrounds were encouraged to engage with Expressionism and Symbolism, leading to the crystallization of a unique artistic concept.

**Shared Artistic Ground:** The advisor and students co-constructed a shared vision, ensuring that no single discipline (choreography, lighting, or set design) was privileged over another.

**Integrative Creativity:** The resulting performance was not merely a directed piece but a collectively owned work of spirit and intellect.



*"The systematic inquiry prompted by our advisor clarified our research objectives. This process equipped us with the confidence to articulate and defend our artistic choices."* > (Student E, personal communication, September 12, 2025)

### **Step 5: Artistic Identity and Professional Growth**

The culmination of these stages led to a profound ontological transformation. Students shifted from the role of "passive learners" to "artist-as-learner" individuals capable of independent critical discernment.

*"The advisor's willingness to listen and understand fostered our decisiveness. It was not merely about risk-taking, but about the courage to manifest our vision."* > (Student F, personal communication, September 02, 2025)

This final phase established a foundation for sustainable professional growth. Students developed the ability to receive professional critique with mindfulness, a vital competency in the contemporary arts ecosystem. They emerged not just with a completed thesis, but with a distinct artistic identity and the resilience required for a professional career.

### **Conclusions**

This study provides compelling evidence for the transformative potential of participatory mentoring within the context of contemporary Thai dance education. Through the longitudinal analysis of the "Rak Long Khu" case study, it is evident that the strategic reduction of hierarchical distance and the establishment of a psychological safe space are not merely supplementary supports, but essential structural conditions for fostering artistic agency and critical inquiry.

The integration of reflective practice and participatory engagement transitioned students from passive recipients of instruction to active co-constructors of knowledge. This process facilitated a deep conceptual crystallization, allowing students to synthesize traditional Thai aesthetics with contemporary Western theatrical techniques. The findings underscore that the outcomes of such a pedagogical model extend beyond the technical quality of the performance; they encompass the cultivation of emotional resilience, metacognitive competence, and a robust artistic identity attributes that are vital for professional readiness in the global arts landscape.

**Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications:** Unlike prior scholarship on reflective learning that predominantly focuses on Western educational environments, this study contributes a culturally embedded Thai higher-education perspective. It enriches the global discourse on reflective pedagogy by demonstrating how traditional arts education can be modernized through human-centered mentoring without compromising academic or professional rigor.

In conclusion, this research suggests that meaningful artistic learning emerges not through directive instruction, but through a relational and co-creative process. By prioritizing the student's emotional and intellectual autonomy, the participatory mentoring model offered here serves as a viable framework for supervising creative theses, ensuring that the next generation of artists possesses both the technical mastery and the critical voice necessary to navigate the complexities of contemporary performance.

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