

Engaging Empathy: The Incorporation of Dance Into an Online Interdisciplinary Course

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About the Course:

Body Image and Gender is a new online course cross-listed between Gender Studies and Dance at Duke University. The course focuses on intersections of body image in dance, fashion, advertising, and athletics. Through written assignments and a final creative project, students evaluated theories of corporeality, analyzed the social media images of their lives, and reflected upon their own movement history in the context of objectification theory and related research on embodiment.

Materials & Methodology

- Students danced or participated in somatic exploration for 10+ minutes each class session
- 1 session included an hour of somatic exploration
- 1 session included an hour of image-based dancing
- 1 session featured a workshop from a guest choreographer who shared her unique fusion of African dance and commercial styles
- Students completed an anonymous post-class survey about their understanding/interest in dance and empathetic engagement with dance

Post-Class Survey Results

- Most students did not identify as dancers
- Students indicated they would be more likely to attend dance shows and classes in the community after taking the course
- Students described how the incorporation of dance helped them develop a sense of empathy towards themselves
- Students indicated that the incorporation of dance into the course lectures helped to build community

Limitations

- Small sample size (6 students in class, 4 completed survey)
- Somatic exploration and focus on the self
- Self-consciousness and the camera

Conclusion

- Pilot study suggests that incorporating dance into an online interdisciplinary course traditionally taught in a seminar/lecture/discussion format has the potential build classroom community, increase empathy, and encourage community participation in dance.

Quotes

“I think kind of being able to explore a different layer of my identity alongside my classmates, helped me to have more empathy for the various viewpoints and perspectives that we all provided.”

“The inclusion of movement in a seminar/lecture is not common, and I enjoyed this component because it provided a balance from the typical discussions and lectures.”

“It [the dancing] really connected to what we were reading and discussing, so I think it enhanced our curriculum.”

“Throughout this course I have seen my negative self talk towards my body decrease.”



Look into my Voice, Hear my Dance A Collaborative Action Dance Project (CADP)

Presenter: Sumana Sen Mandala
MFA Candidate 2020, Director at Dansense~Nrtyabodha
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Naomi Jackson
Associate Professor, Arizona State University
NDEO's Virtual 2020 National Conference

INTRODUCTION

Look into my Voice, Hear my Dance (LVHD) was envisioned as a collaborative project between Bharata-Natyam dancers at ASU and survivors of sexual and domestic violence, recruited through the Arizona Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence. It came out of years of listening to Bharata-Natyam students struggle with creating dance relevant to their lived experiences and to survivors' struggle with not being heard. The process of LVHD centered the voices of the dancers in Bharata-Natyam technique and empowered survivors in telling their stories. 4 dancers paired up with 4 survivors, while 3 survivors worked directly with me to generate their own pieces. The result was a garland of mini-performances that became LVHD. LVHD was presented on February 29 and March 1, 2020, at Hackett House, Tempe, AZ, with an audience of at least 80 people each day. IRB approval for all activities extended from April, 2018-February, 2021. LVHD was

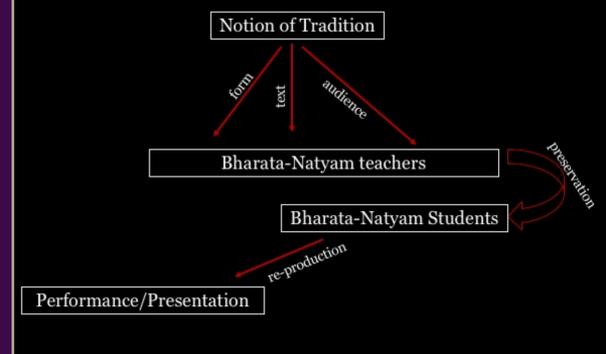
- dance as a language of empowerment
 - a movement to end violence in our communities
 - awakening a collective consciousness.
- That is CADP—a process of community building.

APPROACH/METHOD

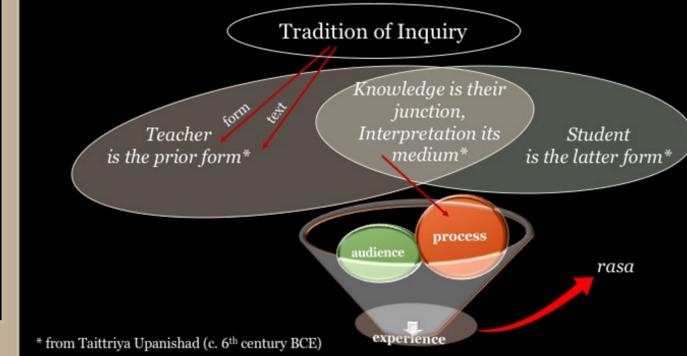
Moving on from...

...towards

Structure 1: Authority of Tradition



Structure 2: Agency in Tradition



—a journey

supported by principles of:

- Feminist Pedagogy
- Engaged Pedagogy
- Somatics
- Collaborative Action Research

realized in experiences of:

- Bharata-Nrityam technique
- Creative Tools
- Reflection

characterized as a method of infinity loops of:

- Learning-Teaching
- Sharing-Listening
- Creating-Engaging

OUTCOMES

"Art is the response of the creative soul to the call of the real."
~Rabindranath Tagore

CADP—The Collaborative Action Dance Project

learning-teaching > teacher's guidance to bring awareness of the dancer's body to the fore; engendering movement that goes beyond re-producing choreography; perfection of technique
sharing-listening > immersion into collaboration with community partner in civic engagement; for the dancer—an exercise in listening, empathizing & honing her skills as an effective communicator; for the partner—new perspectives to their story & engaging in powerful art form
creating-engaging > Bharata-Natyam dancer engages more fully outside diaspora, enhancing her art by generating conversations; partner engages more deeply with self & with a wider audience; community engages via an inviting and provocative experience.

Further investigations: therapy-value of CADP; perpetuating oppression & blocking creative voice through notions of tradition; scaling up LVHD

REFLECTON SAMPLES

Dancer:

The process was well-structured along with including plenty of creative elements. It was surprising to me as to how what we needed next was well thought-out by our director and it was made available either as a resource or an answer.

Survivor:

They listened. That is powerful. It was amazing to see how much the audience embraced our art by watching and listening.

Attendee:

It stands out to me how the survivors overcome the separation and share with us, integrate us listeners; I admire the dancers for the strength to embody someone else's trauma; through this beautiful and welcoming event I feel more confident to approach victims



Photo Credits: Coley Curry & Ri Lindegren

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- My family
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alone (5) amazing (10) art (7) awareness (14)
beautiful (13) believe (12) betrayal (14) brave (6)
collaboration (5) community (12) confidence (5) connect (5) conveyed (5)
courage (24) dance (41) dancers (7)
emotional (20) empowering (5)
experience (15) expression (11) feel (7) felt (5)
form (10) healing (20) hear (5) heart (6) help (9) hold (11)
hope (19) impactful (6) inspirational (5) listen (7) love (16)
movement (8) moving (18) open (7) pain (9)
people (9) performance (22)
powerful (40) process (5) rape (8) reach (5) seeing (5)
sharing (10) silence (12) space (6) stories (24)
strength (23) survival (5) survivors (27)
thank (22) trauma (5) victims (7) violence (13) voice (6)

An Experiment in Collaborative Syllabus-Building: the “buffet-style” career preparation course for university dance majors

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Introduction

I inherited a career preparation course for senior dance majors that had been taught in much the same way for many years with a focus on preparing graduating BFA students to pursue a particularly narrow career path as a professional performer for a traditional type of dance company. However, the student population and the landscape for professional dance had changed significantly since the course was first created and was due for a re-evaluation and re-envisioning in terms of learning outcomes, assignments, and content.

As a learner-centered educator, I began with the practical, rather than idealistic, needs of the students. The field of dance has seen a substantial expansion in the variety of types of professions, and students were no longer unanimously adamant about following a professional dance company career path. Many were interested in starting their own schools and/or companies, seeking teaching opportunities, and exploring options for pursuing graduate education in areas outside dance. Only covering audition information would clearly be insufficient for serving the range of students’ interests.

I thought of the course very much as a springboard to launch students successfully in the direction of their choosing, so I was keenly interested in ensuring that the course prepared students for the career path of their choice. The challenge was in figuring out how to do so in way that would be both practical and appealing while allowing freedom for a variety of choices, given the assortment of possible career paths.

My affinity for progressive ideas about the teaching-learning experience supported an intense interest in a collaborative, rather than hierarchical, approach to the course. I had incorporated collaborative approaches to syllabus construction before and witnessed first-hand the empowering effects it can have on students. This course was the perfect place to employ such an approach. What better way to support the students than to honor whatever career path they were choosing through empowering them to make decisions about the course content and structure?

The Process

Step 1: Share the vision for a collaborative syllabus building process with students. (This approach may take some persuading, but there is supporting literature.)

Step 2: Writing exercise. The prompt - *What is your ideal career path? What are the challenges to this career path? What will help you prepare for this path?*

Step 3: Share and discuss. Create master list of protentional needs (possibly to become assignments).

Step 4: Build the syllabus – a practice in negotiation

- o Course learning outcomes
- o Assignments
- o Assessments
- o Calendar
- o Content

The Buffet-style course

Given the range of interests in the group of students and the long lists of anticipated needs they compiled, we agreed upon what we jokingly referred to as a “buffet-style” list of assignments (see below). There was a small group of assignments all students were expected to complete (40% of the grade), and there were many assignment options from which students could pick and choose based on their goals (60% of the grade).

Assignments¹

Expected: resume, CV, 2 cover letters, reading notes

Options: website, photo portfolio, reference letters, audition plan, video reel, choreography project, personal statement (such as an essay for graduate school or an artist’s statement), master class lesson plans, grant proposal, other special project (open for proposals).

Reflections

The only real challenge in this experience was the effort it took on my part to find content experts to support the needs of the students, meeting with them prior to their classroom visit to ensure they understood the student needs, and navigating scheduling to ensure the experts’ classroom visits. This particular course approach also required a lot of one-on-one work with each student. As expected, some required more engagement and guidance than others, and some needed more support to help keep them on track.

While this approach to collaborative syllabus construction had its challenges, mostly on the part of the instructor, it was an inarguable success. The student course evaluations were some of the highest of my career. Many of the graduating seniors sought me out at the graduation ceremony to share how the course had helped them feel prepared and less anxious about their futures. In addition to helping prepare professional materials, I witnessed students engaging in **negotiation, collaboration, and self-motivation** in ways that helped teach them valuable life skills, in what John Dewey referred to as “collateral learning.” Students are simply more invested in course work when goals are transparent and when students have choices and agency in how they engage with the coursework.

This type of attention to how career-preparation coursework is offered benefits the field of dance and dance education in multiple ways. 1) By encouraging engagement, students become personally invested, which creates a more meaningful educational experience. 2) Encouraging faculty to continually re-evaluate how they craft and curate the learning experience helps ensure that our course content is relevant, timely, and applicable. 3) Re-evaluating the content of career-preparation courses broadens how we think of the dance professions and how emerging professionals engage with society and community, while simultaneously expanding opportunities for student engagement, student learning, and student career paths.

¹ I am happy to share the complete syllabus. Simply email me at melonie.murray@utah.edu to request a copy.

Relevant Literature

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MOVEMENT THROUGH MOTHERHOOD

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Introduction

The Movement Through Motherhood study aims to enhance the pregnancy experience for the mom-to-be, as well as their support person. Participants complete reflective workbook prompts for each trimester. This study involves cultivating physical and mental awareness through a movement and play class in the second trimester.



Aim of Research

By engaging in physical activity in a light-hearted, and authentic way, we hope to promote more mindful and positive non-verbal communication, to cultivate a more secure parent-child relationship

Study Goals

1. Improve maternal mental health during pregnancy.
2. Increase pre-emotional availability during pregnancy with unborn baby.
3. Incorporate partner or immediate family member into the pregnancy experience

Methods

1. Utilizing a pregnancy workbook (by Biringer, Flykt, and Closson) focusing on mindfulness, attachment, and emotional availability. This workbook is adapted to create space for the partner's participation in activities and prompts.
2. Regular check ins via phone or zoom for support and seeing if participants have questions about the workbook, to make sure the workbook is and remains meaningful to them.
3. Filming in the second or third trimester, to assess observed pre-emotional availability in interaction with the fetus, and feedback/discussion via zoom.
4. Mothers and partners explore guided movement and improvisational dance prompts related to bodily and spatial awareness, self-confidence, authenticity, non-verbal communication, adaptability, and trust-building.

Ongoing Observations

Case 1: Greater willingness to express emotions to both herself and her partner during the pregnancy, as well as the ability to reflect on experiences with her family-of-origin.

Case 2: Reflection on prior miscarriages as well as recognition of how she acted emotionally during this current pregnancy. More focused on self-care and emotional awareness as she entered her third trimester. Workbook brought about open conversations between herself and her partner.

Case 3: She used this book as a method to release emotional stress and thoughts, also commenting that she found the calls and book as a helpful resource through this process. This case also suggests that backgrounds of infertility and miscarriages can affect experiences during the first trimester.



Dance feedback indicated being more mindful of movements and using said movements in a creative way. Enjoyed warm-up. Leaning on partner was hard but laughed a lot figuring things out and using movements to convey our thoughts.

Future Work: Postpartum Study



Currently recruiting women in their second trimester.

Interested? Email:
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Dr. Zeynep Biringer

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Keanu Kikau

Photo Credits:

Brian Buss (sepia stills)

Machmer Movement Photography (far right)



SCHOOL OF MUSIC,
THEATRE, AND DANCE
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Using Failure and Vulnerability to Build Community with First Year College Students

Meredith Sims, PhD

What I noticed:

- 1st year dance majors were anxious and uncertain
- Demands of collegiate dance were overwhelming
 - Made them question their beliefs and experiences
 - Challenged their previous training
 - Exposed areas of weakness

Leading to students who were:

- Defensive
- Competitive
- Insecure
- Overcompensating
- Isolated
- Scared to fail
- Embarrassed
- Overly concerned with “grades”
- Risk adverse



What I did:

- Assigned journal entries about how they failed in today’s class
 - Normalize failure as part of the learning process
- Read and discussed blogs and articles about failure and perfection
- Created phrases or assignments that required “failing”
- Encouraged, recognized, praised, and rewarded failure

My favorite failure guiding questions: (Beghetto, 2019)

- What happened when you failed?
- How did you feel when it happened?
- What did you learn from that situation?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- Why is this failure your favorite?



Responses:

What happened when you failed?

- I cried for what felt like hours.
- I was nervous, which causes me to forget...and not perform at full potential
- I was criticized harshly by my instructor

How did you feel when it happened?

- Instantly sad and like I was not good enough
- Embarrassed, anxious and judged
- Frustrated because I knew I was capable of more

What did you learn from that situation?

- That I needed to improve certain skills
- To not get in my own head
- To not give up

What did you learn about yourself?

- I was building this huge wall up.
- I have to work harder
- I can control my emotions, medicine doesn’t control me

Why is this failure your favorite?

- Cause it opened my eyes to what was right in front of me
- Because I now look at this situation from a different perspective
- Because it taught me to trust myself

Conclusion:

Identifying and sharing failure and vulnerability helped all students realize they are not alone. It fostered community and a safe environment for students to learn, take risks, and be vulnerable.



The Integration of E.M.P.A.T.H.Y as an Improvisational Tool for Understanding

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What is the E.M.P.A.T.H.Y. Tool?

E: Eyes
M: Muscles (facial)
P: Posture
A: Affect
T: Tone (voice)
H: Hearing
Y: Your response



The E.M.P.A.T.H.Y. tool cultivates community as dancers become “seers’ who extend beyond the “objective gaze” in order to shift from “staring at” to “looking with.” The objective gaze implicates historical power differentials in dance, while the *empathetic gaze* seeks to bridge student-teacher, audience-performer, and choreographer-critic dyads into communities of collaborative meaning-making and reciprocal communication.

This nuanced responsiveness requires deep somatic attunement to self and to the other, so that the empathic dancer simultaneously sees and reflects the movement of others.

Background

The E.M.P.A.T.H.Y tool was developed by Helen Riess, MD and was the foundation for a controlled trial of empathy education at Massachusetts General Hospital, 2010-2012. The acronym acts as a checklist to assist medical professionals in perceiving and responding to non-verbal cues. It is compelling that the E.M.P.A.T.H.Y. project comes from the medical field, whose own history includes the “surgical theater” where the patient was literally an object to stare at and dissect. For medical professionals, the E.M.P.A.T.H.Y. tool refutes this historical divide, creating community between patient and practitioner by increasing understanding through non-verbal attunement and collaborative curiosity.



Gracia Lam

For dance artists, applying the E.M.P.A.T.H.Y. tool as a framework for partnered movement improvisation explores touch as contact points of communication; fosters empathic non-verbal skills with intentional eye contact and visual observations; invites sensing and responding to muscular energy held by another’s physicality, acknowledges body posturing in weight-sharing, and uses mirroring to engage reciprocity.

Moving toward Understanding

In the 1940’s Margaret H’Doubler wrote about the impact effect that kinesthetic learning had on students. Consider, however, the power of affect, our choice as movers to convey intent or information through shaping, dynamics and use of time. Mirroring another mover in the dancing space is an opportunity to convey listening and build trust.

Inquiry into Kinesthetic Empathy

- Intuit feelings via another’s body behavior
- Mirror neurons transform visual information into knowledge
- Draw upon past movement experiences
- Socially-informed
- Acknowledge facial expressions as foundational to social engagement
- Build reciprocity through choice-making reflected in connection through eyes and face and bodily movement in space
- *Dancing with one’s eyes, seeing* the other in the space, *seeing* our environment and allowing ourselves *to be seen*.
- “Cooperative Eye Hypothesis:” The characteristic features that make human eyes unique evolved in part to facilitate one’s gaze when communicating or collaborating with another on tasks that require close proximity.



As expert practitioners in non-verbal communication, dancers navigate pathways beyond conventional communication methods, using kinesthetic sensing and responding. In so doing, our potential as bridge builders between communities, populations, and perceptions allows us the ability to not only change areas of research in our field but very much change the lives of our students, colleagues, and community members. We embody empathy.



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