CHAPTER 18

Reflections on a compulsory 'dance-at-home' course for pre-service student teachers during lockdown

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Abstract

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic struck South Africa and the dance education course for pre-service student teachers had to be re-imagined for distance learning. Globally, many dance educators moved to synchronous online learning platforms, but in South Africa most students struggled with internet access, data, devices and the lack of appropriate physical space to work synchronously. Hence, I designed an asynchronous teaching method that facilitated dance experiences to my vastly diverse students, at home. Students were provided with instructions for dance-making activities that they could do either by themselves or with their family members. For this course, they had to provide evidence of participation in these activities by means of video recordings, photos or writing a short reflection. Pedagogically, this new method of teaching dance education is unique, since students participated in the dance asynchronously and in isolation, rather than the usual synchronous participation in community with their peers. This course however encouraged participants to involve their family members in the dance, which unlike other dance education methods, offered opportunities to share the actual dance experiences with family members, bringing the dance into the home and community environments. This enabled students to have autonomy over their own dance experiences to choose not only how they wanted to create each dance, but also, which dance vocabulary they wanted to explore and

develop. Students could thus choose how they wanted to express themselves without the usual confinement of required stylistic criteria. From these movement expressions emerged an organic decolonised approach to both experiencing and teaching dance. Moreover, these dance experiences seemed to build connection in times of isolation and facilitate experiences of healing in times of trauma. This paper reflects on this surprisingly effective new dance teaching praxis which emerged from distance education.

Keywords: decolonising dance, online education, creative arts education, trauma, isolation

Introduction

In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic struck South Africa and we joined the rest of the world in lockdown. In a matter of weeks, higher education institutions across the globe had to transfer academic programmes to online platforms to provide multiple pathways for students to complete the academic year via distance education. For South African higher education institutions, the move away from face-to-face came with a specific set of challenges. Most students struggled with access to internet due to the absence of signal where they lived, and/or due to a lack of money to pay for data and bandwidth required for online learning. Many students also lacked an appropriate device - which in the South African context means access to a smart phone and not necessarily a computer/laptop. Due to lockdown, many students' home environments also made it difficult to find a quiet corner to work in, and some students had to share their device with a sibling who also had to engage in online learning.

My task was to re-imagine a tertiary dance education course for distance learning in a manner that would accommodate these challenges. Globally, many dance educators moved to synchronous online learning platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Skype to imitate a face-to-face class experience (Gingrasso 2020; Heyang and Martin 2020). However, I was not in favour of synchronous online platforms for South African students. Synchronous online platforms would only cater for those who are privileged enough to afford good devices, bandwidth and data, and I had an ethical problem with intentionally excluding many students who do not have these privileges. Indeed, I felt that insistence on synchronous online platforms perpetuated the cycle of inequality in education, as it continued to favour those who have, and discriminate against those who have not, deepening the already present educational divide.

I was also mindful that students' challenges to connect to synchronous online sessions could cause feelings of despair, frustration and being left behind, which would debilitate students' morale and add to their trauma in a time of crisis. Because crisis it was. I was deeply aware that our students, along with the rest of the world, were faced with the emotional strain of trying to survive a pandemic. Anxiety, fear of falling sick, experiences of loss, isolation, depression, frustration and an urgent desire to learn how to deal with these overwhelming emotions, was evident amongst students (and other people).

My quest was clear, I not only had to design an asynchronous course for distance learning – but I also had to do it in a way that would add value to the quality of life students were experiencing. Many scholars have written about the value of dance in releasing stress, experiencing freedom (Stinson 1997; Marx 2015) and contributing to a better quality

of life (Bond 2019). Research has shown that dance movement therapy, a field derived from dance education, has been used to alleviate trauma and anxiety (Karkou and Sanderson 2001; Koch *et al.*. 2014; Koch *et al.*. 2019). Thus, I was adamant to create opportunities for students to actively participate in the dance, to add to their quality of life during lockdown.

This chapter provides a reflective analysis of my experiences in developing and implementing the new 'dance-at-home' course for distance education. Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper's (2001) reflective framework guided my thoughts as I critically engaged with the 'What? So what? and Now what?' questions to make sense of some memorable incidents during this course. Cook-Sather, Abbot and Felten (2019: 17) however, advise Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoLT) practitioners to move away from rigid methodological frameworks when presenting reflective writing. They encourage a "flexible, open approach" to "create the generative space necessary to represent the fullness of analysis of learning and teaching."

As such, this chapter provides a brief overview of the newly designed dance-at-home course, followed by a glimpse of what I saw on a weekly basis. Thereafter, a reflective analysis will provide my professional learning surrounding the outcomes of this dance-at-home course, as it seemed to create spaces for: (1) Decolonising dance experiences (2) Connection in times of isolation (3) Healing in times of trauma and (4) Effective teacher training. The conclusion summarises the chapter.

The dance-at-home course

This dance education course forms part of a compulsory Creative Arts module for the Foundation Phase pre-service student teachers at the

University. Its purpose is to prepare students who are mostly 'non-dancers[1]' to become dance education facilitators in their future classrooms. Dance education is different to dance-as-performance-art, since the primary focus is on the holistic development of individuals as they engage with the process of dancing and dance-making, rather than prioritising the end-product - a flawless performance (Karkou and Sanderson 2001). Whereas dance-as-performance-art requires dance training to perfect the detailed nuances of each movement, dance education provides opportunities for participants to explore their own movements and their creative Selves. Creative movement (a teaching method within dance education) generally incorporates movement exploration, bodily expression, creative problem-solving and dance-making activities (Hanna 2008).

Prior to the pandemic, these dance education sessions consisted mostly of interactive and collaborative dance-making activities with others, which allowed for placing the physical body at the centre of understanding the Self as a social being (Koff 2000). My doctoral research investigated the value of such embodied interactions for developing awareness of Self in relation to Other, ultimately promoting cohesion (Marx 2015). Due to the pandemic, embodied interactions which are an integral part of this module, were impossible. Hence, I was deeply concerned about the value and effectiveness of a dance education course that had no interactive dance-making experiences. Heyang and Martin (2020) rightfully asked how dance education could be sustainable during a time of social distancing, distance learning and pandemic.

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[1] I am not fond of this term, since all persons should be considered 'dancers'.

Another challenge was finding a suitable mode of communication to provide equal access to the course. Equal access to education is an important Constitutional (RSA 1996) human right that I wanted to uphold in my teaching praxis. Fortunately, students received free access to our online learning management system (LMS) platform Moodle as it is a zero-rated data site. Unfortunately, students had to pay for data if they clicked on a Uniform Resource Locator (URL). If my intention was to ensure no additional costs for students, I had to make my own dance tutorials and upload them onto Moodle. Moodle's upload limit was only 50 Mb. This meant that I had to record a 5-minute video with my phone's camera on a medium resolution, send it to my husband via WhatsApp, have it sent back to me, upload it onto google drive on my phone, access it on my laptop, edit the video if necessary, and finally upload it onto Moodle. Although this was a time-consuming process, it worked[2]. I made a series of 5-minute videos which students could access for free. Students could access written explanations and instructions on Moodle if they struggled with poor internet signals. The medium for free and equal access to education was set.

I designed a new asynchronous teaching method that facilitated dance experiences for students, at home. One hundred and eighty students were provided with video tutorials that included instructions for weekly dance-making activities that they could either do by themselves, or with their family members. For example, 'Choose an emotion. Design five movements that would depict that emotion. String your movements together to form a dance.' Each activity had an 'alone option' and a 'family option.' Each week, students were required to submit evidence of themselves doing these dance activities to myself

[2] Lately I am more online savvy: The video can be edited by phone, WhatsApped to a second sim card and uploaded from the phone directly onto the Moodle app.

via WhatsApp[3]. Initially, I had an ethical concern with insisting on students sending me videos of themselves dancing, since I felt like it sounded quite creepy. Also, aware that I was training future teachers, I wanted to role model safe dance teaching praxis to protect future vulnerable children. Hence, I created a choice. Students could either submit a video recording, or a set of action photos, or write a short reflection of what they enjoyed most about each activity, as evidence of their participation. Since these were submitted via WhatsApp, I could send students individual feedback through personalised voice notes. The course span across six weeks and students actively participated in a total of 18 dance activities.

Through the eyes of the facilitator

I received wonderful videos of students and families smiling, having fun and dancing together in their home environments during a time of crisis. I was deeply moved. Students danced in small tin rooms, outside 'rondawels,' in the dust of a field, in deserted lecture halls, bedrooms, corridors, garages, pavements, and in a grassy field next to cows in-front of a beautiful mountain range. I met students' family members and learnt more about 'their other-than-student identities' as students. One student had three of her own children on her hips as she showed me her activity while another gathered her four young siblings to dance with her. Another started a dance video in a whisper, 'sorry Mam, I will not be able to play the music because my baby is sleeping next to me' before she stealthily tiptoed through her routine. Many students danced with their children, siblings, roommates, boyfriends, parents,

[3] Initially we tried video submissions through Moodle, but students seemed to prefer WhatsApp since it was more user-friendly and used little data. At this point, students started receiving a free data bundle from the university.

grandparents or some of the community's children. Others danced alone.

I felt a veil lift as I was invited into students' homes (albeit virtually). I became more aware of whom I was teaching. I no longer perceived students as cohorts of culturally diverse people who shared a communal homogenous 'student identity.' Each student was unique in terms of their role and responsibilities within their families and home environments. Glimpses into the lived lives of students allowed for a more humanising perspective of them. This changed the way I understood my role as lecturer. I became more understanding of students' circumstances and more lenient towards 'second-to-family issues' such as assessment deadlines. Moreover, witnessing students' home environments reminded me of our complex tasks as teachers to relate new content to what these diverse individuals already know, as Piaget (1947) suggests. As such, I became more mindful and adaptable during content creation to ensure a more inclusive approach to learning and teaching.

Reflective analysis

In the first week students had to choose a movement that represents each family member. They could ask family members to provide them with a movement or create their own. They required a minimum of five movements, and where the family was small, they could add the names of special people to their family dance. One student - a father, decided to gather his whole family for the activity. The grandfather of the family decided to teach the indigenous movements of their family clan name to his grandson. The student thanked me for creating this special family moment and shared that his grandmother also tearfully shared her

gratitude towards the university to create opportunities for this kind of knowledge sharing.

Decolonising the dance experience

Reflecting on this experience, I realised that some of the dance activities in the course created spaces where teaching and learning could occur through the organic communal sharing of indigenous knowledge within the family. Thus, resembling traditional methods of transferring indigenous knowledge in communities with family members (Mabingo *et al.*. 2020). In the above moment, the sharing of indigenous knowledge occurred across three generations. Moreover, since the instruction to engage in this activity came from a tertiary institution, it seemed to facilitate a validation of indigenous knowledge systems as being of value and relevant in modernity, and in higher education. The dance activities thus created spaces where indigenous knowledge could be placed at the centre of the learning experience, de-centralising Western knowledge systems and subsequently, decolonising not only the content, but also the transfer of content through traditional teaching and learning methods, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Zembylas (2018) suggest.

I observed that quite a few students chose to use their indigenous movement vocabulary to explore and develop their creativity during these dance-at-home activities. Students could interpret 'twist, sway, jump, turn, lean and collapse' in their own way, without the pressure of conforming to western or Afro-pop dance traditions. Students could thus celebrate their indigenous knowledge and cultural identities through their dance creations. In this regard, I was reminded of Rowe, Buck and Martin (2014) who suggest that traditional indigenous dances should not be seen as fossilised artefacts of history, but as dynamic,

evolving and artistic dances relevant to current society. Thus, encouraging creativity within indigenous dance forms, creates opportunities for community members to be validated and celebrated as innovators, creatives and artists - as they engage in a symbolic representation of the dynamic nature of their ethno-cultural group. Hence, these dance-at-home experiences affirmed pride in ethno-cultural identity, for those who chose to use their indigenous dance vocabulary.

The creative movement activities of this course thus allowed for the exploration of 'natural' movements (Kaufman and Ellis 2007), which indeed created spaces where individuals could re-discover their authentic selves (Smith 2002; Kauppila 2007; Mabingo *et al.*. 2020). The dance thus became interconnected with the lived experience of becoming.

Pre-Covid-19, face-to-face dance-making in the multicultural classroom looked different, as students designed movements with culturally diverse peers. Although I investigated the value of these intercultural interactions (van Heerden 2019), I never considered that something of value was lost because of the presence of the Other. This dance-at-home course allowed individuals to be unaffected by the peer pressure of popular dance culture or the hidden impact of being in vicinity of the other. The extent of this hidden impact on dance-making and how it works, still requires investigation.

In this course, students were free to choose which movements they wanted to explore, so they could also explore movements outside their cultural styles. Hence, students were not at risk of being unwillingly imprisoned by or 'tied to' their own ethno-cultural identities (Foucault 1994). This is something I often wonder about in debates on

decolonising the arts. One cannot assume or force a person to study indigenous art/dance/music merely because they are African. In the context of equal opportunities and respecting the dignity of individuals, it is important that we acknowledge an individual's autonomy of choice as to whether they would like to pursue indigenous or Western art forms (or both).

Connection during times of isolation

Humanity's desire to connect with other people has been emphasised during experiences of lockdown. As lecturers we were challenged to create opportunities for students to connect with each other during online learning. Sadly, this course did not create spaces for student-to-student interaction. However, this course created a different kind of connection, one that is often overlooked by higher education's emphasis on 'connecting.' This dance-at-home course seemed to foster connection between family members. The first dance activity of this course required students to learn a set choreography from a home-made video tutorial. One student who danced with her family thanked me for the activity, since it was the first time that she, her mother and sister smiled and laughed together since her father had passed away one and a half months ago. This comment struck my heart, as I realised the potential impact of these dance experiences in restoring connections between family members in times of trauma and isolation.

I witnessed many connecting moments between family members throughout the dance-at-home course. Whether family members were dancing together, encouraging from behind the camera, or applauding and providing instructions from outside the frame – it was clear that the compulsory dance-at-home course affected many family members. My own studies have shown that dance education has the capacity to

build connections, foster friendships and instil notions of care amongst participants in the dance (Marx 2015; van Heerden 2019). Thus, for those who participated simultaneously in the dance, this may have held true.

Cultivating connections with family members impacts a person's experience of health and wellbeing (Bell and Bell 2009). Moments of connection within the family can also instil hope, the kind of hope that makes possible the imagining of a better future. Experiencing connection can assist persons to experience support and care, which enables them to adapt to the "challenging reality" of living through a pandemic, dealing with a fatal disease and lockdown (Bareket-Bojmel *et al.*. 2021: 134). If these connections are not fostered, individuals run the risk of experiencing loneliness, isolation, hopelessness, depression and anxiety. These family dance experiences seemed to create moments of connection between family members, an important psycho-emotional experience to assist persons to cope with the trauma and isolation begotten by the pandemic.

The dance-at-home course also fostered a deeper student-lecturer connection than the prior face-to-face courses. Since students sent their personal videos, photos and reflections each week, I had to provide them with regular individual feedback which would not have occurred in the face-to-face classroom. I used personalised voice notes where I could address each student by name (which is something I found challenging in a regular face-to-face setting). The voice notes also added a humanising quality to the student-lecturer exchange, since students could hear the kindness and warmth of the inflection of my voice as I provided them with ways to improve their creative imagination, bodily implementation and performance. Thus, voice notes enabled me to combine the sharing of cognitive knowledge with

emotional qualities such as humour, empathy, kindness and understanding. Individualised voice notes also seemed to make the students feel special, valued and recognised, because they were getting individual attention and recognition from their lecturer. This deepened the student-lecturer relationship as it created a series of positive learning experiences, which in turn, increased students' quality of work and their creative development.

As I reflect deeper, I become aware of the limitations of critical and concise written feedback, as it leaves little room for emotive engagement between student and lecturer. Perhaps it is the absence of personalised emotive engagement during critical feedback that often induces negative learning experiences. It seemed as if the use of voice notes built a more personal connection between lecturer and student, which was significant both to student and lecturer, during a time of isolation.

Healing in times of trauma

At one point during the pandemic, I found myself writing up to three condolences messages per week. Students, myself and the rest of the world were traumatised as many lost family members and/or struggled with feelings of anxiety, stress, depression and being overwhelmed. In the dance videos however, students were always smiling – even in the serious moments when depicting the emotion of anxiety through movement, a satisfied, joyful or laughing smile would come at the end of the dance as the student moved towards the camera to switch it off. My observation of the dance videos led me to believe that each dance session created spaces for students to experience moments of joy, amid the trauma. The act of dancing releases hormones such as endorphins into the body which enables feelings of happiness (Bungay *et al.*. 2020).

The dance experiences provided spaces where students could breathe deeply, have fun, relax and experience some relief from the stress and anxiety they were experiencing, which resonates with what scholars Stinson (1997), Marx and Delport (2017) and Bernstein (2019) suggest. Students could channel their complex emotions about the pandemic into a physical and creative outlet. They could be present in the moment of movement as the dances allowed for a mindfulness (Koch *et al.*. 2019) that distracted them from potential feelings of being imprisoned by panic or despair. They could focus their attention on the act of creating something beautiful and meaningful through movement - movement, which some may view as a sign of life - during a time of loss, fear and uncertainty. Students also experienced a sense of accomplishment with each dance submission, a valuable feeling in times of feeling overwhelmed. In this regard, Bernstein (2019) argues that dance experiences can affirm and empower individuals to re-discover themselves as creative and whole human beings after trauma. I wonder whether creatively solving the problems posed in each dance activity, somehow reminded students of their capacity to deal with a challenge successfully and creatively? I also wonder whether the dance-making activities empowered students to re-discover themselves as creative and capable human beings during a time when many felt powerless, as Bernstein (2019) suggests.

Connecting dance with emotional healing, as mentioned earlier, is not a new idea. Over centuries ethno-cultural dances have been used, and are still used, to build and heal affiliated ethno-cultural communities across the globe (Onyeji 2004; Edwards 2010; Marx 2015). Indigenous African dances for example, are still used to heal associated communities. Dance movement therapy is also a recognised method of psychotherapy (Karkou *et al.*. 2019; Koch *et al.*. 2019). A most recent

study proposes that involvement in music and dance can alleviate the psychological and emotional strain associated with contracting Covid-19 (Cineka and Raj 2021). I propose that involvement in this dance-at-home course seemed to create spaces for healing in a time of pandemic. In this regard, UNESCO (2020) released a statement that encouraged teachers across the globe to use creative arts activities (such as these dance activities) to provide psychosocial and emotional support to students and learners as they deal with the trauma of a pandemic.

Effective teacher training

A further surprise was that students who engaged in the dance-at-home course developed a more mature understanding of the value of dance education in the classroom, than during the face-to-face course. Perhaps it was because the individual had to take full responsibility for the creative processes and outcome of each activity. This responsibility may have reminded them of the responsibilities they will have as future dance facilitators. Perhaps it is the added responsibility and determination that comes with online learning – you are on your own now, you better make it work. It may also be that they themselves experienced the value of these dance-at-home activities as they dealt with emotional challenges during the pandemic. Or it might have been because students had the option to reflect on each experience, which may have invoked a deeper understanding of their experience (Ghaye 2011).

Conclusion

In the context of this book, I would like to highlight the professional learning that has occurred as a teacher educator. Initially, I was convinced that a distance dance education course without embodied

interaction with culturally diverse others, would have little value. What I did not expect, was that the absence of student-to-student interaction would generate new spaces for meaningful experiences. This new dance-at-home course created spaces for decolonising the dance experience, since students could use their indigenous movement vocabulary within their home and family environments, to creatively explore both traditional and innovative avenues of expression. Thus, as a professional educator, I learnt how to create organic and authentic spaces where indigenous knowledge can be shared. I also learnt about the value of exploring movements in mono-cultural settings.

This course seemed to build connections in times of isolation. Students could dance with their family members, increasing experiences of care and support in times where many experienced fear, anxiety and isolation. As professional educator, I learnt that using personalised voice notes as feedback facilitates a more humanising student-lecturer connection, which facilitates positive learning experiences and increases feelings of support in times where many felt isolated.

This dance-at-home course also created spaces for healing in times of trauma, since it provided students with a creative and emotional outlet for the stresses related to online learning and the pandemic, as it realised experiences of joy and accomplishment. This asynchronous 'dance-at-home' course made equal access to dance education during a pandemic, possible. The dance experiences seemed to increase the students' quality of life, as it equipped them to teach dance education to their future Foundation Phase learners.

A personal note

The implications of these newly acquired insights places me in a conundrum. Whereas the value of the 'dance-at-home' course is evident above, my previous research indicated that the face-to-face course promoted social cohesion in a multicultural society (van Heerden 2019). Thus, the current question I am asking myself is – in the context of South Africa and 'unity in diversity' (RSA 1996), which is more important? Is it more important to decolonise learning experiences, or to promote social cohesion? There are many more deep questions here, perhaps for future research.

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