Issues and challenges around the fostering of a productive respectful community ethos within an integrated class context

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Abstract

In teaching and facilitating dance in integrated community contexts, building a community among participants seems critically important. In this context, how are the differing needs of a class managed in order to foster a respectful productive learning environment? How is a sense of agency cultivated? What pedagogical issues arise in such a context? In this article, I attempt to interrogate these questions, recognising strategies, identifying and unpacking some of the negotiations, issues and challenges. My approach draws on the work of Chappell (2011), Kuppers (2007, 2014), Shapiro (1998) and Zitomer (2013). Theorising my personal practice from a dance teacher's 'self-narrative' point of view, interwoven with other viewpoints from dance and educational research, it can be argued that much is to be gained from reflection that empowers teachers and learners in integrated community contexts.

Introduction

The last decade has seen an increase in integrated community dance classes being run both nationally in New Zealand and internationally (Benjamin, 2008; Kuppers, 2006; Zitomer, 2013) as part of the outreach programmes of dance companies and/or as part of a community-based arts programmes. Michelle Powles (2007) wrote a book celebrating integrated dance charting the first ten years of Touch Compass. She states, "In New Zealand there was no one working in integrated dance in 1995. In fact, the term and concept was generally unknown" (Powles, 2007, p. 17). However, an increasing body of work in relation to dance has arisen around issues of equity of access, contesting dominant and/or conventional notions of what dance is and who can dance, and challenging notions of representation and embodiment (Albright, 1997; Benjamin, 2008; Dandeker, 2007; Kuppers, 2007, 2014; Sandahl & Auslander, 2005; Whatley 2007). Others have written about how to teach integrated dance in a variety of settings with useful information on the

practicalities of teaching and specific content for a range of dance learning experiences (Cheesman, 2011a, 2011b; Cone & Cone, 2011, Zitomer, 2013). Dunphy and Scott (2003), Hills (2003), Kaufmann (2006), and Levete (1993) weave theory and practice side by side in their books that focus mainly on practical exploratory, improvisational and creative dance activities supplemented with useful teaching strategies and accessible ways of working. Adam Benjamin (2001) has written *Making an Entrance*—a ground breaking book containing a more extended guide to the challenges and creative opportunities in teaching integrated dance. Petra Kuppers, an artist, professor, dancer and researcher, who writes prolifically in this field from a variety of standpoints (particularly in challenging forms of representation and embodiment in dance), champions the disability cultural movement (Cheesman, 2011b). Her latest book, *Studying Disability Arts and Culture* (2014), is explained as a handbook that describes the study of disability arts and culture foregrounding difficult problematic concepts within this diverse world.

Drawing on my work as a teacher within the field of integrated dance for more than 20 years, I focus on the key question of how to foster a productive, respectful community ethos within an integrated dance class context. My teaching philosophy aligns with feminist pedagogical practices and is built around the strong belief that everyone can dance and deserves the opportunity to explore the full range of human capabilities and potential through the moving thinking body. "Through dance, the body can move with passionate commitment to one's life and responsibility to others and the larger world" (Shapiro, 1998). I am a person who likes to talk through the body:

> I move from being still into dance
> Communicating through movement
> My body bends, twists and rolls cutting through space leaving traces
> My limbs reach out and I am
> dancing from within

I have previously described my class structure for integrated dance contexts as consisting of introductory activities; improvisational tasks around a given idea; development, variation and repetition of movement sequences; scores; circle, pair and group improvisations; viewing and responding; and social time (Cheesman, 2011a). Within this class structure, some common features of my classes involve greetings and 'checking in' with dancers, frequent sharing and responding to each

other moving, use of a buddy system and building on learning from previous classes (Cheesman, 2011a). I have argued that "rituals of practice, which are set up from the outset, create a learning culture that values all contributions" (Cheesman, 2011a, p. 39). In describing my class structure and common features, I have now begun considering why building a community among participants is critically important for teaching and facilitating dance in integrated community contexts.

Unpacking this overarching question from a critical standpoint (Cheesman, 2011a) prompted the following more specific questions: How are the differing needs of a class managed in order to foster a respectful productive learning environment? How is a sense of agency cultivated? Intertwined into the two former questions are discussions on the pedagogical issues that arise in such a context.

In the following article I attempt to weave a variety of viewpoints together and interrogate these questions by recognising strategies, identifying and unpacking some of the negotiations, issues and challenges. It is important to point out that this weaving is a fluid process, shifting and changing in relation to the complexities the questions raise. It is a process in flux in which there is not one fixed set of answers but rather a series of dispositions/ways of operating that build agency (Carr & Claxton, 2008). My aim is to offer a meaningful and respectful moving reflection while marking multiple privileges, and opening up the spaces of vulnerability (Cheesman, 2011a) with regard to fostering a productive respectful community ethos/learning environment within an integrated class context.

The Context

The integrated community context in which I teach and facilitate is part of the scope of Touch Compass Dance Company, based in Auckland, New Zealand. Touch Compass describes itself as an integrated dance company comprising of both disabled and non-disabled dancers who view diverse physicality as a creative springboard, rather than a wall that needs to be overcome. Powers (2007) reasons that the term integrative dance is more in keeping with Touch Compass's positive and professional approach, and furthermore, all company members have different levels of functionality. This description of Touch Compass aligns with different definitions of community dance: The Foundation for Community Dance in Britain states that "community dance is a strand of participatory dance practice defined by particular values, intentions, qualities, and methodologies" (Amans, 2008, p. 4). Scholar Petra Kuppers (2007) defines community dance as "to be a movement that facilitates creative expression of a diverse group of people, for the aims of self-

expression and political change" (p. 2). And further, Benjamin (2008) concurs in stating that "its role in nurturing creativity and contributing to the cultural life of its locale, aware of its potential for education and enlivening the imagination" supports "opening up channels of communication between strangers" (p. 105). Thus, Benjamin's (2008) comments extend the boundaries of what community dance offers in terms of supporting positive human relationships even further.

The Touch Compass outreach programme includes an integrated community dance class offered weekly which attracts male and female participants with a range of embodiments. The specific aim of these classes is to enable dancers to discover their own creativity, expression and self-confidence.

Working in this context it is impossible to disregard the tensions around language usage. My use of the term 'integrated dance' does not attempt to disguise that the term 'disability' is deeply contested (Benjamin, 2002 Cheesman, 2011a; Kuppers, 2006, 2014; Whatley, 2007). It is not my intention to recap the tensions, binaries and complexities around language usage. However, I wish to acknowledge there are many pitfalls when discussing terms that are often contested and reinforce the very codes and exclusions these terms seek to challenge. We can and do define ourselves in multiple ways (Cheesman, 2011a). Allan (2014) argues that "the arts have inclusive potential both as a force that draws people into participation and as a political vehicle for seeking out normally silenced and disenfranchised voices" (p. 518).

Petra Kuppers (2014), in her latest book, asserts that "language changes just as cultures do and that how we feel ourselves to be human is deeply entwined with the issues of cultural representation …" (p. 12). Furthermore, she says that " … words are relational, are wielded at different times, and by different people for different reasons" (p. 12). However, I would concur with the notion that integrated dance can be defined as people with different forms of embodiment, including disability (Kuppers, 2011, private communication). The words used and subsequent meanings continue to evolve and morph with the developing discourses centred on disability culture and community.

Within the integrated dance class I teach there is a range of embodiments, including two class members with mobility devices. However, the physical markers of difference may not always be as obvious as moving with mobility devices might be (Kuppers, 2014). There is a great deal of diversity and variation within this group of people in their facilitating dancing. It raises joy in the possibilities it brings and at times evokes tension in creating challenges to support learning. As

Benjamin (2008) says, "It is the acknowledgment of difference and the resolution or exploration of problems that arise from it that invigorate the work" (p. 45). Just as embodiment is different, one pedagogical approach does not fit all in this class.

Class responses

To extend my investigation of why building a community among participants is critically important for teaching and facilitating dance in integrated community contexts, I asked the group I teach what was important to them in terms of fostering a community atmosphere within the class. Over several classes, they answered informally with the following responses that I recorded in my teaching notes:

> 'Cause you have friends/buddies/mates.
>
> Friendliness.
>
> Leave class happy and energised.
>
> So you feel comfortable with who you are.
>
> Makes me happy.
>
> Challenging for everyone.
>
> Belong to something.
>
> Helping support people make them more comfortable.
>
> Acceptance of people.
>
> Adapt dance to everyone—understand different abilities.
>
> Work together as a team.
>
> Openness and talking.
>
> Working with all class participants through changing group sizes pairings.
>
> Strong learning relationships—ability to shift on a daily basis.
>
> Inclusion.
>
> Builds confidence.
>
> Flexibility allowing for diverse responses.
>
> Value difference.
>
> A freedom to explore your own movement possibilities without being judged.
>
> Laugh at times.
>
> Warm-ups whole body whole group.
>
> Cool activities content that is both challenging and also current e.g., hip hop.
>
> Learning skills and elements of dance.
>
> Style moves you enjoy.

So you do not have to prove yourself who is better who is not.

Ask for help without worrying about it.

Being part of a larger community.

Other people saying seen them on Facebook i.e., likes.

Different opportunities that have opened up to them as part of being in this class.

As I reflect on their responses, I suggest that they point to a range of factors that might be grouped under the following headings: affirmation, belonging, appealing content, acceptance, opportunities, enjoyment and risk-taking. While I continue my reflections on the more specific questions, I return to these factors in relation to the differing needs of a class in fostering a respectful productive learning environment, in cultivating a sense of agency and pedagogical issues in this context.

Managing the differing needs of a class in order to foster a respectful productive learning environment

It is important when I teach that the conditions are such that they enable people to take full and active part in the class. In order to promote a welcoming environment, I start as participants arrive, always being at class early and greeting each person as they arrive. The participants further reinforce this when they arrive, greeting each other, which frequently includes hugs, verbal hellos, high fives and snippets of news. We always begin in a circle formation with an activity that helps to acknowledge each class member and builds towards a positive relationship between us from the outset. Another recent introduction to the beginning phase of class is described as follows: each class member was invited to lead a warm-up activity and the diverse results delighted the whole class as we embodied each person's warm-up contribution with gusto. Returning back to the circle our class always ends in a closing ritual. We revisit selected movement material explored in the class in order to celebrate and acknowledge one another's varied contributions to the class. This is also a time for reflection, how they found activities in the class, what they liked and why and what they would like to repeat. Future opportunities are signalled at this point also. Finally, our class always closes with a physical gesture like an air high five. Within the above examples there is evidence of affirming group members, fostering a sense of belonging, enjoying each other's company and embracing future opportunities. Typically, a feeling of

energised happiness emerges through the community, movement and connections in the class.

It is important to build a positive rapport with the participants by taking an active interest in them as people. Who they are, what is important to them within this class, how you can meet their particular needs and what their idiosyncrasies are. Social time is important in our class and in the break we chat, laugh and enjoy each other's company, plus we are often celebrating someone's birthday with a song and the relevant number of claps with much hilarity followed by cake. As a teacher, I need to be open to dialogue with the participants around how they would like to be supported in class and what ways of learning works best for them. This is not always easy. It requires negotiation and flexibility to find solutions, whereas Benjamin (2001) asserts that "for every solution he has found to problems encountered there have been others who have found different but equally satisfying ones" (p. 10). I agree with Russell Bishop (2012) who asserts that a pedagogy that recognises that all people who are involved in the learning and teaching process are participants who have meaningful experiences, valid concerns, and legitimate questions is important (p. 8).

One of the main aims of the class is to create an environment where all participants with different embodiments feel safe to explore, play, take risks and dance together to express themselves. Within this we seek to celebrate individual difference through embracing the range of possibilities that dancing differently opens. This requires being open and flexible to allow change to be initiated. Class participant's comments, such as *adapt dance to everyone—understand different abilities; learning skills and elements of dance; cool activities content that is both challenging and also current; so you do not have to prove yourself who is better who is not; and a freedom to explore your own movement possibilities without being judged* seem to attest to a key philosophical stance of being interested in empowering people to dance in whatever form this takes and "for participants to move safely yet extend their range of movement vocabulary and explore new ways for communicating and moving" (Ehrich, 2010, p. 249). This requires me to be very observant—what movement do they have and how can we extend that? Acceptance of all the varied responses to tasks set should be embraced and mined for extending and stretching possibilities these responses may offer.

Thus, I agree with Kaufman (2006), who contends that "it is important to discover class participants' ability and as a teacher your part is to identify this facility, talent, and skills … and present opportunities to use and enhance these

qualities in dance learning" *(p. 15)*. Trying to facilitate everyone working is at times a complex struggle and I rigorously resist acceptance of mediocrity or total exclusion from the task. It is important to extend all members of the class, including the dancing helpers with the expectation that everyone works according to their own capabilities and beyond; stretching the boundaries of what is possible (Cheesman, 2011a). However, there is also an expectation that everyone works hard and engages fully with the tasks set. Participants comment that they are challenged in class by the tasks set; however, they embrace these challenges in the knowledge that they can ask for help at any time and that their varied responses will be valued. This is a dance class not bound by a set curriculum and so we have the flexibility to incorporate popular dance styles while also building and maintaining improvisational skills, which form the basis of this class. The class members are intuitive and support others in the challenges of tasks set through verbal encouragement or through demonstration or a buddy pairing which allows them to embody the task together. Ehrich states that "empowerment as a construct is connected to an ethic of care since it values relationships with others and sees individuals as unique persons who can give and receive" (2010, p. 246). In the class, it is very important for all to have a voice and be able to express themselves in different ways that value their diversity.

These ideas are identifiable within the class members' comments above, namely, being accepted for who we are; not being judged; allowance for diverse responses; and a freedom to explore your own movement possibilities without being judged. Barr (2013) states that the "participants find a sense of self while taking ownership of their dancing" (p. 116), and acknowledges this by advocating that through sharing, learning and creating, a unique relationship evolves among all present in the class.

An example of this in action is the recent introduction of solo presentations. Each class member is encouraged to prepare a short solo outside of class time and share with the group during class time. They are responsible for choosing the theme (if that is appropriate), movement vocabulary and the structure of their dance, and lastly the musical accompaniment. This new development is very popular amongst the majority of the class with many wanting to present solos on a number of occasions. It has been my experience so far that all class members watch attentively and at the completion of each solo the performer is greeted with loud applause and noise from the audience in appreciation and acknowledgement of their efforts. This development furthers the opportunity for participants to take

ownership, value what they contribute and cultivate a sense of independence through their solo presentation. Next they are encouraged to give feedback to the performer around what they noticed about the dance and why. At this point it is important that everyone has an opportunity to speak and reflect on what they have seen. I have found that this reflection works best if specific questions are asked to different individuals in the class. At this point, it is important to allow for each person to process their thoughts in their own time before responding. Class members were actively listening to one another with rich dialogue occurring within a safe space supported by mutual trust and respect. Although in writing this, I noticed I did not include myself in the performing of a solo; perhaps I did not consider it as I am frequently participating in the class and leading from within; that is, they do see me dance frequently within each class. The two new developments that solo presentations and contribution to the beginning phase of class would come under several headings; that of affirmation and acceptance from their peers, opportunities to contribute to the content of the class and to take risks knowing that their dancing will be celebrated in all its diversity. This, I would contend, fosters a respectful productive learning environment. "What is distinctive is a shifting space of participation to encompass knowing together with sensing feeling and perceiving that engagement with the aesthetic enables and indeed provokes" (Allan, 2014, p. 520).

Performances are an important part of this class's calendar year and contribute to all the following: affirmation, belonging, appealing content, acceptance, opportunities, enjoyment, and risk-taking in a variety of ways. For example, this year, 2017, we performed in Touch Compass's twenty-year celebration at the viaduct basin in Auckland. For this performance, because it was at night, we used LED lighted poi as our prop. Much excitement, engagement and risk taking was generated from the building of a dance piece to be shown during this night-time InMotion parade.

During this parade a large audience congregated and watched the community class perform dancing colours accompanied by a marimbas band. They were very proud of their achievements and this dance has been subsequently performed at Interact Festival in October this year.

Figure 1:   Touch compass community class performing *Dancing Colours* at interACT Festival, Auckland, 2017. Photo: Sue Cheesman

Performance opportunities contribute to the class ethos by input into the choreography during the process and working together towards a specific outcome. Secondly, performing together to different audiences allows for them to be affirmed on Facebook and by the comments they receive after the performance. Thirdly, the in-class experience with improvisation seems to transfer into their performances in which there seems to be a feeling of collectivity and support through the way they interact with one another before, during and after the performance, an ineffable sense of community.

I am interested in a performance of possibilities, which gives voice to those on the margins, including members of integrated dance contexts. As a teacher, I believe everyone can dance and I am keen to promote, engage and celebrate those movement possibilities that are on the edge (Cheesman, 2011a). The class culture is not about prescription but has an emphasis on curiosity and individual/collective achievement, which will confidently fulfil everyone's potential. Through playing in the space together, a sense of curiosity and adventurousness are fostered. Openness in our thinking allows the possibilities for change and adaptive thinking; that is, to foster and accept new ways of knowing and new perceptions while also maintaining a respectful learning environment. Kerry Chappell (2011) talks about

humanising creativity, which is both individual, collective and communal. A process which she asserts "encourages empathy, shared ownership and an emotional journey … a process of change and becoming" (p. 5).

Cultivating a sense of agency

A sense of agency is seen in the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. Cone (2007) supports this by asserting that by having participants "equally contribute to the class recognises a teaching paradigm that is based on inclusion and plurality of voice". She adds that in this approach "the teacher does not silence participants' ideas but empowers them to take leadership and express their own meanings" (p. 5).

Pasch (cited in Houston, 2009) advocates for listening to and acting upon the knowledge and experience participants bring to a project. From the responses from class members, both they and I value the importance of empowering others to communicate in dance, take risks and surmount challenges, embracing a rich and varied range of movement responses. It is important that a traditional dance aesthetic does not limit their creative endeavours, and instead the dominant dance discourse about valuing technical ability is challenged. Curiosity should always arise to the fore.

Pedagogy is a process which is evolving and is shared with participants by encouraging ownership and contribution to the content and direction of the class. Cone (2007) illuminates

> teaching and learning are neither fixed nor finite but are dynamic expansive, and shaped by the moment. In this way, the experience becomes a nurturing one for different possibilities of making sense of and accepting other ways of knowing. Multiple voices are encouraged and recognition of one's lived experiences is valued. (p. 4)

Reciprocity in the exchange of knowledge is maximised and teacher imposition is minimised in these integrated dance contexts. Chappell (2011) argues that it is the ability to comprehend other people's perceptions, ideas and ways of doing things and to respond to them.

Much of this aligns and resonates with the work by Russell Bishop (2012) in education around culturally responsive pedagogy for Māori students in the New Zealand school system. Specific values that reflect a Māori world view include kotahitanga, ako and manaakitanga. 'Kotahitanga' refers to the ethos of bonding,

evident in the teachers' inclusive teaching strategies, behaviour management and positive feedback towards a common vision. Ako is described by Bishop (2012) to literally mean to teach and to learn; "this term metaphorically emphasises reciprocal learning, which means that the teacher does not have to be the fount of all knowledge but rather should have be able to create contexts for learning where the students can enter the learning conversation" (p. 187). Class members report that they like being involved in the class through demonstrations and their ideas being valued and applied in practical tasks. 'Manaakitanga' refers to the ethos of caring. It is the foundation for successful and reciprocal teaching and learning experiences, the task of building and supporting a caring and loving learning environment.

Dance artist Andrea Olsen (2014) writes about bonding as finding ways for group members to connect through touch movement and a sense of humour (p. 135). Within this class, we work a great deal through contact improvisation, and we do, as one of the class member notes, laugh a lot at times. We are able to laugh with each other around our own foibles and at ridiculous movements we may find ourselves doing, much to the enjoyment of all. Games such as chain tag produce a riot of sound and chase with everyone embracing teamwork to get everyone out. I agree with Pasch (2006), who "emphasises that it is easy to get too serious about working with people on the margins and that play is an important part of relating successfully with the excluded such as those with learning disabilities and dementia" (p. 217).

Conclusion

In summary, I would add that the class ethos is based on relationality; experienced and generated between those of us in the class. Not to say that there are not uncomfortable moments. Despite the many obstacles to learning, difficult challenges and complexities I face in the context of integrated community dance, I remain committed to the principles of inclusivity by constantly reflecting on my own teaching pedagogy in order to foster and sustain a respectful productive learning environment within these community dance classes. Through aligning with a drive for social justice and a desire to embrace new perspectives on different forms of embodiment, spaces are opened up where dancing differently is valued (Cheesman, 2011b). "… by giving the participants a sense of their own abilities, by enabling them to create material by themselves helped build in these individuals a sense of agency" (Pasch, cited in Houston, 2009, p. 217). Embracing diversity,

ambiguity and multiple voices are paramount. The alive connection and spark created within this community dance class is never fully explainable and lives within the ineffable.

Future directions for this research thread could look at the role of improvisation, including contact in these classes and the complex issues of artistic product versus social inclusion agendas.

The participants' responses seem to suggest that they value the following encapsulated under these headings: affirmation, belonging, appealing content, acceptance, opportunities, enjoyment, and risk-taking. To witness each other dancing and to connect through touch, moving and dancing; to celebrate the unexpected and embrace the element of surprise and to enjoy each other's company, to laugh, to empathise, improvise and play are all vital components to producing an engaging and caring community ethos by relating successfully. This can be achieved by attention to the following. Firstly, to celebrate individual difference and a collective empathy by providing opportunities to lead, suggest and to have their particular way of moving central at different points in the class, thereby capitalising on participants' abilities and possibilities to create positive learning experiences. Secondly, it is important to cherish the connections between one another, finding a place where we might create new or alternative meanings and embrace multiple perspectives through dancing. Thirdly, to build a positive rapport with the participants by taking an active interest in them as people and embracing reciprocity. Making a space where dancing differently is valued and disrupts conventional notions of dance. Allowing space for vulnerability. Creating a culture in the class, which does not focus on movement prescription but embraces curiosity and individual responses as exemplified in the following class members' remarks: *Flexibility allowing for diverse responses; value difference*; *a freedom to explore your own movement possibilities without being judged*. All of these points, I would argue, align with supporting the fostering of a productive, respectful community ethos within an integrated class context. However, there is no recipe but a series of touch points which embody who we are as humans dancing together.

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