

Advocating culturally responsive teaching practice for Indian classical dance in Australia

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Abstract

Building on recent research that recognizes cultural difference as an aspect of globalization in order to gain new ways of understanding and expression within teaching practices, this paper, informed by such theoretical perspectives, will examine particular strategies and approaches of Indian classical dance teachers working with young people between the ages of 6-17 within private dance studios in a community-recreational setting in an Australian South Asian diasporic context. It will discuss how symbolic and traditional dance knowledge is negotiated and adapted to an Australian context for students who learn this art form in Australia.

Recent research in teaching dance has validated the importance of acknowledging cultural content within specific dance genres, especially within multicultural contexts (Ashley, 2013; Banerjee, 2012; Loquet & Ranganathan, 2010; Lopez Y Royo, 2004; Albright, 2003). Such teaching practices link to notions of inter- and transculturalism, whereby teaching practices are rooted in the quest to define shared interests and common values across cultural and national borders. This paper will examine two case studies using two Indian classical dance teachers as key participants and will aim to analyze traditional influences on their teaching methods and the cultural differences present in the Australian South Asian diasporic context where the teaching occurs. The paper will also attempt to explain how the teachers respond to new transcultural incitements, which in turn may influence the teaching of Indian classical dance through affiliations with particular cultural identities, while also negotiating the adaptations needed within the Australian South Asian diasporic context.

Keywords: Indian classical dance, diaspora, teaching, transcultural, South Asian

Teaching in transcultural spaces

The teaching, learning, and performance of Indian classical dance is bound by the adherence to a strict set of dance codes, language, and technique ingrained within the territorial context of India's culture, tradition, religion, and customs. The teaching methodology, rooted in its distinct style whereby disciplinary knowledge is passed down from teacher to student through a master-apprentice model (*guru-shishya parampara*), continues to affirm Indian classical dance's identity through its Indianness (Gaston, 2005, pp. 19-22; Prickett, 2004, p. 5; Venkataraman, 1994, p. 81).

When the dance and its specific teaching method is deployed outside India, some negotiations occur as a result of being re-inscribed in new socio-cultural settings (Banerjee, 2012, p. 20). Shifts and transformations in teaching cultural dance forms emerge as a result of this newness and due to demands of teaching students living outside the traditional place and context of learning (Prickett, 2007, p. 15). At the same time, there are rigorous expectations for the dance to adhere to tradition and for preserving its character and elements of identity. Cultural dances are often perceived to be instant symbols of identity within many ethnic and immigrant communities (Shay, 2006; Grau, 2002). For many people from the Indian subcontinent, the dances represent links to unique history and traditions that are markers of their ethnic and cultural landscape. Grau (2002, p. 59) notes that most diasporic families who send their children to Indian classical dance classes do so with the belief that it is an ancestral duty and will allow them to reconnect with their cultural roots. Shay (2006, pp. 46-47) echoes similar notions when he observes that many immigrant, ethnic, and diasporic communities choreograph their personal and communal identities in new social cultural contexts through dances that are emblematic of their identity.

In these transcultural environments, teachers are presented with innumerable new encounters that challenge, confront, and offer opportunities while creating dichotomous situations where there are expectations to follow traditional methods of teaching while recognizing the need to adapt to cultural differences. I will discuss and examine these aspects to understand how they affect the adaptation and sustenance of teaching practices and learning of the discipline within an Australian South Asian diasporic context. The challenges faced by teachers and the translocative opportunities available in new socio-cultural contexts will also be

examined and described by drawing on the knowledge of two practicing Indian classical dance teachers in Australia working in a community-recreational setting.

Teacher Tales

Lakshmi's¹ Story

“(This is) a different road and travelling on this road (as a teacher) is difficult, because there is lot of patch work and you know you have to walk carefully...”

Lakshmi began her dance teaching career in Australia six years ago. Classes are held in her garage, which has been converted into a dance studio. Lakshmi studied dance for 14 years under the master-apprentice model. With no prior teaching experience, Lakshmi started teaching by relying on memories of how her teacher taught her. She says,

I still try to copy my teacher, because that's what I have learnt ... even now, though I am not with her, I imagine what she would do ... I want to teach my students what I have learnt.

However, Lakshmi soon realized that to sustain and engage with the teaching and students in the new environment, she had to encounter and negotiate with aspects inherent in the new socio-cultural environment. This includes how children learn and process information, their behavior, attitudes and cultural knowledge, what they know, and how much they know. She says,

I didn't know how to capture the kids and keep [them interested] ... I was really strict and probably a bad teacher then ... Over the years, I have actually learnt how to teach first ... how to get the interest going with the kids and not to force them and the way kids have to be taught here ... I kind of understood, the knack of being a good teacher.

Over the years, Lakshmi has tried to navigate through the newness that teaching in Australia brings while acknowledging inadequacies in her personal teaching knowledge and

¹ Names of all participants and places have been changed to protect their identity.

practice to ensue a sustainable teaching practice. In her opinion, she has adapted some level of leniency without compromising traditional, cultural, and technical aspects of the dance style. This, she believes, is essential in facilitating a better learner understanding in an environment where there is limited exposure to Indian classical dance or aspects of Indian culture.

Lakshmi allows herself to be influenced by the contemporary teaching culture and practices implemented within the Australian socio-cultural and educational environment. My interactions with Lakshmi have revealed that she attempts to traverse her teaching while continually assessing student learning and performance results. Lakshmi observes that constructing and directing her dance teaching practice to the needs of her Indian-Australian students in a culturally appropriate manner allows her students to explore and engage with their Indian culture. Of this, she says,

I will still stick to my bible (style of dance, *Natyashastra*², etc.). I will not go against it ... It is like the *Bhagavad Geetha*³ for the dancers. It is saying do it this way. It is also saying ... why you should not do it in a certain way. So that way we have every right to shift, because we are catering to different kind of audiences ... Teaching is a difficult job. Teaching is not easy ... especially when it is a new art, cultural knowledge ... and especially when they (students) don't have that exposure and knowledge.

Sudha's Story

"It is not a joke to take dance class ... especially in Australia. There are differences."

Sudha is a dance teacher with more than 15 years of teaching experience, most of which has been in India. In Australia, she teaches more than 50 students, and also works in a state school as an English as second language (ESL) teacher.

² An Indian theatrical and dance treatise, believed to have been written in 200 CE that systematically articulates and elaborately discusses Indian classical dance and dramatic theory, body movements, manual gestures, histrionics, and facial expressions.

³ The *Bhagavad Geetha* is a 700-verse Hindu scripture written in Sanskrit and akin to The Holy Bible for followers of the Hindu religion.

Sudha began teaching at the age of 17, as soon as she finished her *arangetram*⁴. She had no formal teaching experience. Of this, she says,

...someone told [me] as soon as you finish your *arangetram*, you can take classes. I didn't know the value of all that. At that time, I knew only two *allarippus* and one *jathiswaram* and one *varnam* and two *thillanas*⁵ ... I didn't have a very strong background of learning dance at that time ... I started teaching the same *margams*⁶ ...

Though Sudha's initial teaching practices were influenced by her teachers, her current teaching style has evolved and relies on confidence gained from her rigorous disciplinary training and extensive teaching experience in different environments and contexts. Her self-assurance and growth as a teacher is built on the foundation of the challenges and encounters with newness she engaged with when she ventured into teaching without any formal teaching experience. She relates,

I am there in this teaching line for more than 15 years; I know how to tackle students ... so I truly read the minds of the kids. I am able to now ... because I am always with the kids. It (teaching) has evolved ... When I started I was just a kid like in teaching. Now I can ... I am ok.

Teaching in Australia has prompted Sudha to reassess and readapt her teaching methods to suit the needs of the teaching-learning environment. Sudha reasons that students within the Australian learning environment lack exposure to Indian classical dance and related cultural markers, which may affect their ability to comprehend and learn, especially since the discipline is a cultural and traditional art. Teachers, consequently, have to invest more time through explanation to engage students with the disciplinary content to facilitate learning and

⁴ *Arangetram* is the debut on-stage dance performance of a student after undertaking years of training. The word *arangetram* is from the Tamil language: "*Arang*" means "stage" and "*etram*" means "to ascend."

⁵ *Alarippu*, *Jatiswaram*, *Varnam*, *Tillana* are the types of dance items taught to and performed by a Bharatanatyam dancer. Within these categories, there are many different dances that can be taught and performed.

⁶ *Margam* means a pathway or course followed. It is the structure and traditional order in which dance items are learned and performed. Items included are *Alarippu*, *Jatiswaram*, *Shabdham*, *Varnam*, *Padam*, *Tillana*, and *Mangalam*. Other items such as *Pushpanjali*, *Thodayamangalam*, *Kaavutvam*, *Mallari*, *Javali*, and *Keerthanam* may also be included. The emphasis on technicality, movements, footwork, expression, themes, etc. vary between the types of dance items.

understanding. In addition, she also asserts that a traditional and cultural art form like Indian classical dance has to be taught in a disciplined and structured manner to ensure that the core nature of the dance style can be maintained:

Here, because of the way the Australian education ... and the closeness between the teacher and the student in their classrooms in schools ... they are friendly, but [in] this kind of an art, the teacher should be strict. Strict means you don't have to take a stick and say, 'Ok, you do that. Practice that' ... But you have to follow certain rules and regulations ... I want children to follow that. That doesn't happen here ... In India, I am a very rough and tough teacher.

Sudha emphasizes that every teacher eventually needs to create their own unique way of teaching that suits their respective teaching-learning environment. The opportunities that have come her way through observations and interactions with other teachers, teaching in both academic and dance environments and the subsequent qualification in teaching, her employment as an ESL teacher in an Australian school and her current experience of teaching dance to children from the South Asian diaspora in Australia has, in Sudha's opinion, facilitated the building of a strong foundation upon which she continues to construct and evolve her teaching methods, processes, and practices:

Everything is a learning curve, process. So I learn ... from day one, and till today I am learning. How to deal with the kids ... that is what I am learning. I am still in that learning process only. Not yet completed. Not yet graduated.

Findings

Ram (2000, p. 262) observes that migration into a radically different culture introduces a disturbance and distancing from the set of beliefs and behaviors often associated with tradition. She elucidates that this movement from one cultural context to another reveals tradition to be dependent on the now non-existing socio-cultural contexts that sustained it in its original setting. Teaching-learning processes practiced in such contexts, termed by Leach and Moon (2008, p. 7) as pedagogic settings, where teachers and learners create, enact, and experience knowledge over

time, are always socio-historically and culturally situated. Consequently, teaching, learning, and all related activities in this fertile transcultural environment, where two cultures meet, are interdependent and in a process of constant interaction (Slimbach, 2005; Hanna, 1999). The cultural differences present in this context may sometimes be challenging, risky, and adventurous to teachers due to inherent cultural variations (Poursabahian, 2012, p. 25; Loquet & Ranganathan, 2009, p. 70). Often seen as problematic, the newness this situation offers can bring forth opportunities along with challenges to create possible pathways for new teaching-learning explorations and to facilitate new ways of engaging and understandings to emerge.

My interactions with Lakshmi and Sudha revealed a palpable anxiousness concerning their need to be ensured that their teaching aligns with the standardized training method usually implemented in India. This alignment includes strict adherence to a prescribed framework wherein all movements are predetermined in terms of sequence and performance by the exacting standards defined by the discipline and teacher. Though there was some leniency in how learners were taught, both teachers were fervent in asserting that there is no compromise in what is being taught and content being taught, when compared to India. Lakshmi and Sudha endeavor to replicate both context and content in ways they experienced them to ensure that their students are given the best opportunity to engage with their learning of Indian classical dance.

Both teachers were of the opinion that students' lack of exposure to Indian classical dances in Australia necessitates a need to invest more time explaining and validating reasons for learning something new. This includes aspects related to Indian culture, mythological stories associated to the dance, and even aspects such as respect toward the teacher and attitudes regarding learning. Both teachers attempt to assert the importance of acknowledging Indian cultural and traditional aspects during the learning process; however, with only one one-hour class per week per student, lack of time meant that the teachers could not and did not want to go into in-depth explanations.

In addition to being bound by their traditional and personal influences, in a diasporic community-recreational setting, teachers are also often expected to meet the expectations of the diaspora. Expectations mainly revolve around being able to publicly perform the dance and construct the cultural practice of Indian classical dance as a signifier of their homeland, tradition, religion, and culture (David, 2010, p. 91; Grau, 2002, pp. 55-60). Parents of most students often express the desire to see their children “perform on stage” and be able “to connect and have

familiarity with Indian culture.” For most parents, enrolling their children in dance classes means that their children are given the opportunity to show off their engagement and understanding of their Indian identity. Consequently, dance becomes a mode of exhibiting the diaspora’s cultural identity through dance.

Teachers also spoke about the involvement of parents as a factor that influences their teaching. Parents demonstrate a keen interest and often sit in class to record or observe the teaching so that children can be assisted in their practice at home. This is often very helpful, as students return the following week with a certain level of mastery of the movements. However, the presence of parents also becomes a distraction, both for the teacher and students, especially during the teaching-learning process.

Furthermore, the teachers commented on the need for introducing a broad curriculum and variety in content to keep children continuously engaged with learning. Providing variety ensures that children are not easily bored and continue to show interest. This is in contrast to how Indian classical dance is traditionally taught, where new content is introduced only after mastery and perfection of what has already been taught. The teachers believe this difference is predominantly due to children being exposed to a different way of learning in Australian schools whereby teachers flexibly structure content and its dissemination to allow a variety of learning paths for students.

Lakshmi’s and Sudha’s teaching stories reveal some of the dichotomies that exist within the arena of teaching Indian classical dance in Australia and the deliberations they undertake as a result of this newness. While teaching within a diasporic recreational-community setting, teachers are often presented with the question of how to effectively integrate traditional influences of the dance with the cultural and training differences that exist in the new socio-cultural context. Teachers thus negotiate with the competing task of wanting to implement an instructional methodology that can effectively transmit knowledge embedded in the discipline relevant to the Australian South Asian diasporic context while being able to evoke, among students, similar learning outcomes that the teacher experienced from learning this art form in their country of origin (Poursabahian, 2012, p. 25).

At this fertile transcultural interface, where sometimes expectations challenge practice, Sudha and Lakshmi seem to be conscious of the differences at a play. They seem concerned when they have to address the differences within the contextual space in which the learning

happens. Though Lakshmi and Sudha recognize that students in Australia learn differently, they seem to have some difficulty in articulating how to culturally respond in a manner focused on matching cultural preferences for teaching with classroom practices. Both teachers respond in ways they see fit by relying on personal experiences and memories of teaching and learning.

Slimbach (2005, pp. 213-215) observes that symbols of cultural and national heritage, such as in dance, are ingrained in the national character and to be freed of them is not possible or desirable. However, within a transcultural environment, these cultural symbols can often provide a platform for teachers to engage in an openness to facilitate development of thoughtful dialogues between traditional influences and cultural differences. Such teaching practices may be in a position to better sustain themselves in the new transcultural context by drawing on aspects from across diverse cultures that can help to nurture a broader cultural identity founded on more universal virtues and values.

Conclusion

In a teaching-learning space, teachers and students bring with them their own culture, bias, and their very own contextually-situated teaching and learning experiences. In this fertile space, it is vital to acknowledge that the impetus for optimal teaching-learning experiences comes from accepting that dance resulting from engagement of two different cultures is not always congruent. Different cultures come with pluralist values that are presented through different cultural literacies, narratives, concepts, perspectives, and expectations, and colored by an individual's own contextually-situated cultural experiences. These values necessitate a need to problematize the validity of traditional subject knowledge in relation to students' culturally and socially diverse identities and experiences, and for transcultural teachers to review established and constructed teaching practices and to rebuild them based on their varied understanding of cultural difference (Salter, 2000, p. 50).

A teaching practice that enables learner understanding and participation in ways relevant to young people's interests, capabilities, and local contexts can allow them to examine influences of social, cultural, and historical contexts, both past and present, on dance. Such teaching practices have the potential to create productive spaces where learners may be able to better engage, negotiate, and evaluate their own preconceptions, assumptions, and experiences about culture and identity. Engaging in these teaching spaces through a culturally responsive teaching

practice can empower teachers to compound student understandings of cultural difference while facilitating a willingness to engage in historical and cross-cultural analysis (Salter, 2000, p. 177).

Lakshmi's and Sudha's stories have shown that it is important to recognize that certain aspects of teaching practice are essential components; however, it is also crucial to understand that teachers' actions cannot be treated in isolation to students' actions and their learning outcomes. The teacher-student interactions move parallel to the objects of knowledge that unite them in the first place. This does not require the content within the dance discipline to be disassociated from its original context, but it does mean that the original content is deconstructed in a progressive manner and reconstructed in a way that establishes links between the cultural codes that exist within the two cultural contexts as they cross the border of cultural difference during the educational process. My research to date has revealed that such culturally responsive teaching practices may be in a position to facilitate construction of a new sense of transcultural understanding, belonging, and identity that acknowledges not just the cultural differences, but also provides pathways to absorb them.

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