

Educating Artist Educators for Youth and Community

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Abstract

This paper will cite examples from Singapore from efforts being made by the National Arts Council and the Ministry of Education and a new MA in Pedagogy and Practice initiative at LASALLE College of the Arts to address the gap between practitioner training and working as an arts educator in schools and communities. It takes special skills and training to utilize the experience and talents of performing artists and to develop teaching skills that transmit to students and are agents of transformation. Passive, didactic “follow me” methods are too commonly found as young dancers, often unskilled in pedagogy methods and research, continue to be the main source of dance teachers and educators working in schools and communities. Training in developing a “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998) with an egalitarian approach to creative teaching and learning, combined with research and reflection, can yield exemplars of best practice that can be shared.

Keywords: mentorship, dance, creative pedagogy, community of practice

Background

The scope of this paper’s title refers to practices that can be applied across a broad frame of dance education for young people in school settings and communities. In this instance, the design of two case studies offered by an artist/mentor to teachers as professional development in dance education is presented. The study is framed by Wenger’s (1998) notion of a “community of practice” whereby the “domain” are participants who volunteer and use their free time between classes to come together for shared learning sessions in their schools. This learning “community” enables shared journeys of discovery, creating an experiential bond between them — these interactions of “practice” subsequently scaffold new knowledge and resources that they can apply either individually or as a group. Action research and reflective practice (Dewey, 1934; Schön, 1987) are also fundamental tenets to these learning “communities of practice.”

There were several features that differentiated these learning communities from teacher dance education courses that may be part of undergraduate or post-graduate

programs. Firstly, the teachers were typically very experienced and the cohort always included the head of the arts department as well as both established and younger teachers — they all learned alongside each other in an encouraging, supportive atmosphere. This formed the basis of our “community of practice.” Secondly, the initiative to bring in an artist mentor was at their own request. They perceived a need to further their knowledge, skills, and creativity to work with the students in dance areas. Each mentorship was crafted in collaboration with the teachers who designed the curriculum and followed not only the Ministry of Education requirements for their core subject (for instance, music or physical education), but their own individual ways of working with their students. Their experience enabled a diversity of pedagogy and entry points into the curriculum — the community learned from these different approaches. Finally, few were dance-trained but saw the expressive importance of dance for their students and were willing to try their best to include dance in curriculum areas such as music, physical education, and more.

The final discussion will share aspects of the MA in Pedagogy and Practice initiative at LASALLE College of the Arts. It is aimed at artists from visual and performing arts disciplines, including dance, in a nucleic model that places pedagogy, reflective practice, and research at the core and the artists’ individual practice at the periphery. In this amalgam, practitioners gain insights into pedagogy through the lens of their own artistic field — in essence, the reverse of the school classroom teachers. Co-partnering these groups is a positive development and strands of interaction are noted later.

Context

Singapore’s context is that of a multi-racial country where social harmony between racial and religious groups is reinforced not only through days that pertain to these groups (Christmas Day, Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Hari Raya), but throughout the year. Cultural dances are created and practiced in all schools for special celebratory occasions like National Day and Racial Harmony Day and are well known to all Singaporeans through community participation, celebratory events that involve large numbers of school children, and the like. Hence, dance prevails in a cultural context rather than an individually centered, personal, creative context. Dance does not exist as a separate subject in schools in Singapore but is a popular elective throughout the school years — efforts in these Co-Curricular Activity elective courses (CCAs) are usually toward perfecting a routine in a particular genre for a performance. These sessions are run by choreographers who come to the school to work with the students.

The National Arts Council (NAC) and the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore have implemented the Artist-in-School Scheme (AISS). It “supports collaboration between individual schools and local artists/arts educators in developing arts education programs customized for their students ... AISS projects should be aligned with the school's long term plans of developing a vibrant arts culture...” feature of this program is that schools apply on an identified need basis and are involved in negotiating and planning with the mentor what they consider would work best for their programs

(<https://aep.nac.gov.sg/nacaep/nacaep/programmes-and-schemes/Artist-in-School-Scheme.html>). Each mentor’s area of expertise and interests are listed; my areas are stated as “Creativity — innovative teaching and learning dance; pedagogy — best practice, safe dance and multi modal approaches; curriculum development and course design; advocacy/strategies and developing partnerships and support networks for teaching and promoting dance in education, action research and reflective practice for teachers and students” (personal communication between the National Arts Council and teachers applying to the program).

Observations and interviews with teachers arising from their involvement as an Artist Mentor at the primary school-level in dance classes will be cited; School A was a program for Lower Primary children (Years 1 and 2 — ages 5-7) and School B was for Upper Primary children (Years 5 and 6 — ages 11-13).

Research question and design

The program explored the outcome of adopting a community of practice scenarios to the NAC/MOE Artists Mentor in schools programs. An important reason was to assess the long-term sustainability of the relatively short intervention for the teachers as a professional development tool. What could the teachers take away immediately to share with the students? But more importantly, was there a long-term impact and were they able to use the framework to continue their own development as creative dance facilitators and curriculum designers? Ultimately, had they acquired sufficient skills that they could share with the community network and together move forward with a sustainable dance program?

Methodology

Schools opted for the number of hours that they required for the program and this was split: at least two thirds were for instruction/exploration (teachers only) and one third for observation and reflection (teacher with their class). The time allocation ranged from 12-20 hours over a term. The topic areas were negotiated and changed slightly according to the aims

of the program; for instance, one school wanted to focus on embodiment as part of the music classes. Overall, the following key areas were covered:

- Laban Movement Analysis (LMA): the use of space, weight, time, and flow.
- Development of gross and fine locomotor skills and components of movement: balance, rhythm, dynamic range, spatial awareness, strength, and flexibility.
- Multi-modal stimuli: combining language through music, storytelling, and spatial awareness.
- Somatic understanding: opportunities for students to express their thoughts and feelings. Through dance, non-visual interactions, for instance, in improvisation, requiring thought, sensitivity and reflection become a sensory, intuitive experience for the children.
- Engagement in creative meaning-making that involves the imagination, the senses, and emotions are core components. This acknowledges the context for learning — for instance, the local and global setting.
- The language of teaching movement: the use of imagery and metaphors such as “fly like a bird” are incorporated frequently in dance pedagogy, choreography, performance, and evaluation.
- Choreographic basics: developing group work with children, utilizing their skills and ideas. Incorporating the use of formations, different levels, canon, and dynamic changes.
- Preparing simple cultural dances with the use of props (Chinese fans, umbrellas, etc.).
- The context for dance: local and global components. Home, family, community, cultural groups, the environment — the classroom, playground, local and global interests (e.g., dance about the cycle from seed, to tree, to fire).
- The four tenets of any dance program should be included in a simple, non-competitive way — these are creating, presenting, evaluating, and reflecting. “Presenting” here refers to children showing their peers or teachers what they have discovered through a movement task. They may reflect on it in a multi-modal way by making a drawing about their dance, for instance, or talking about it to “evaluate” it with their friends.
- The synergy of form (what the body is doing), content (what the dance is about —

themes, topics, narratives), and the context (show each other in the class, an assembly performance, a cultural day context).

- Lesson planning and curriculum development: focus on the relationship between movement and music. Finding common threads through the use of words, concepts, and learning outcomes.

Case examples

Following an introductory session, themes and topics of their choice were addressed and subsequently tried out with their usual classes. Observations and reflection followed, and these insights indicated strengths and weaknesses to be followed up in the next session by the teachers. It was a very hands-on approach.

CASE A. Lower Primary (Years 1 and 2 — ages 5-7). The first example was instigated by the head of music. She participated with one other female teacher; however, these were an “envoy” to pass on the information to other teachers who were unable to attend the sessions. This was not ideal, as the other teachers missed not only the experiential aspect of the program, but they also did not have the opportunity to “play” with the ideas creatively to explore their own responses in a shared group situation. Nevertheless, they were part of our community of practice and diligently filled notebooks with reflections and feedback for the two attendees about what worked well and what did not with their classes. Online sharing was also utilized by some members of the group.

The classes tackled the particular needs of the music teachers and how they could best work within the parameters of their curriculum requirements (balancing new material with their current curriculum), but also extended this further to incorporate more movement. It was interesting to link the language of music to movement in several forms through the understanding of words like “legato” (flow) and how this had a corresponding meaning in movement. The project had a clear focus — to implement movement as part of the existing music classes at the school. The following objectives were addressed:

- To develop skills and confidence in movement education in partnership with music curriculum activities for the current P1 and P2 classes.
- To embed movement into all future music classes at the school.

- To understand the basics of creative movement including Laban Movement Analysis, multi-modal, and somatic approaches.
- To synergize music fundamentals including language, concepts, and practical activities with movement.
- To develop the use of narrative, props, and imaginative scenarios to generate creative movement and music.
- Become proficient in the use of various props, spatial concepts, and dynamic variations to choreograph short sequences of dance that includes music.
- Develop the use of metaphoric language to stimulate creative movement.
- Understand the connection between the FORM, CONTENT, and CONTEXT in developing class units or sequences of lessons.
- To develop lesson plans and an overall curriculum structure that includes music and movement in partnership.
- Teacher-skill development in basic choreography, coordination, embodied rhythm, and experiential activities.

Some teacher feedback included:

Children naturally move when they hear music. It is only natural that we use movement to teach basic concepts of musical elements before they can apply the musical concept into instrumental playing. I especially enjoyed the course when we were asked to choreograph our own dance. I didn't realize that creating was fun and also an assessment of our understanding of the song — like the phrasing, the repeated movement, a set of movement, a deeper appreciation for the song and expressing the feelings/emotions of the song... (C — music teacher Primary 1 and 2).

My intention in applying for this program is to learn the pedagogy of creative movement so hopefully I can incorporate creative movements in our school's music curriculum. Although I am not trained in Dance, I am interested to learn more about helping children to acquire the skills in movements and more importantly, how to use movements to reinforce the musical concepts taught... (A — Head music teacher Primary 1 and 2).

CASE B. Upper primary (Years 5 and 6 — ages 11-13). This was a larger community of teachers comprising 15: five males and 10 females. Four were physical education staff committed to integrating creative dance into their curriculum; the others were subject teachers with some interest in dance — a couple with backgrounds in Chinese, Indian (Bharatanatyam), and street dance. Over the semester, they covered similar topic areas as listed above, but the group dynamic and focus was completely different. This was in part due to the men in the class who brought a different level of physicality and energy to the tasks, and also the focus on being able to conduct traditionally-based dance sessions (Indian, Malay, Chinese dance) through concepts of creative movement. They had a genuine interest in the creative process rather than the product-driven CCAs that the children had experienced with outside choreographers coming in.

The teachers developed short sequences of choreography incorporating processes that they could incorporate when working with their classes. They gained confidence through working through structures and processes that were immediately transferrable to their students while enhancing their own skill development. Some teacher feedback included:

It was interesting to explore the possibilities of a creative approach to CCA traditional dance. We were able to develop warm-ups, creative pedagogy, and enhance the learning experiences for the students... (LL – Chinese dance teacher)

Discussion

The movement skills of the two music teachers were minimal and this necessitated devoting some part of the program to upgrading their physical coordination and confidence with movement — this took time away from other creative movement activities, which were supposed to be the thrust of the mentorship. Similarly, the second group required time spent on areas such as safe dance practice, dance games, warm-ups, and skill development in a basic repertoire of simple steps, rhythms, movement phrases, and general locomotor skills.

Not surprisingly, the teachers really enjoyed the creative components of the program, immersing themselves in small group work to create short scenarios through storytelling, use of props, situations, and more. When transferring these activities to their class groups, their experience as teachers really came to the forefront as they were aware of how to work with the children, introduce an activity, build on it, and complete tasks for the usual end-of-session “show and tell.” Each observation session was followed by reflection, journal entries, sharing, and follow-ups.

The interface between the classroom teacher and the dance instructor coming to the school for CCAs is the essence of the dance programs offered in most schools in Singapore. Much more research, training, and development is required in this area to allow for more cooperation, collaboration, creative learning, and protocols to be in place to make this relationship work effectively — we addressed some of the issues in the workshops.

Conclusion

Effective pedagogy in the teaching and learning of movement and dance should incorporate movement, play, games, and dances through a creative, child-centred, multi-modal approach to teaching and learning. Knowledge of the fundamentals of creative dance education, methodologies, and strategies can assist teachers in implementing a meaningful child-centered program.

The objectives and activities of this movement program should be fundamental training for any teachers working with young children, as it is typically international in this field. Developing creativity through play, action songs, simple scenarios, storytelling, and multi-modal activities should form part of the day for every child in Early Childhood to P1 and P2 cohorts. Teacher training in Singapore does not include dance as part of arts education, although there are some modules offered for physical education trainees. At present, the NAC is filling a gap with artist mentorship; however, a wider issue of uncoordinated, inadequate training in music and movement needs to be addressed at some point.

The MA for artists in Pedagogy and Practice is another important step in this process. On the opposite end of the spectrum to the role of the classroom teacher in a dance education program, the artist should be able to contribute something special to a sustainable, existing program. Too often, artists are not trained in pedagogical areas and often transfer fairly “ballistic” dance studio practices (Lakes, 2005) to a school with the intention of perfecting a set routine. These artists need to learn the difference between dance training and dance education.

Ideally, the artist mentor and the classroom teacher should unite in a community of practice where sharing and learning from each other takes dance education forward in Singapore, creating connectivity and networking between the dance sectors.

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