

daCi Youth Forums: Reflective Documentation

Paige Horton & Meggi Sweeney Smith (USA)

Introduction

Youth Forums are a component of the daCi international conference, which have evolved in past years and taken different formats based on the facilitators' vision and the theme of each conference. The purpose of these Youth Forums - creating space for students to engage with their peers in discussion about things that specifically relate to and/or impact them - is an important element of what daCi offers young dancers during these conferences.

To cultivate the idea of Youth Forums, it seemed natural to engage a newly established group (Springboard) as the developers and facilitators for this program. Springboard, a new daCi initiative designed to give young dancers over the age of 18 opportunities to continue their engagement and become active members of the organization, focuses on bridging the gap between the youth participants and adult leadership within daCi. The inaugural Springboard consists of 10 individuals representing 6 different countries - a mixture of students in undergraduate and graduate programs, and young professionals - most of whom are first-time daCi conference participants, and members.



daCi Springboard 2014-2017. *Missing from the photo are members Mette Overgaard (DEN) and Meggi Sweeney Smith (USA).*

Planning Process

Our goal for these sessions was to give students a forum for their thoughts, fears, ideas, and dreams to be voiced and discussed with peers. We felt that for students who attend these international conferences, dance most likely plays a very important (and possibly all-encompassing) role in their lives, and the opportunity to share that with other like-minded young people could be invaluable. By discussing the things which are important, concerning, or exciting to them - not only with peers, but also with the Springboard facilitators - participants would be able to have their voice be a contributing factor in the planning of future conferences and could learn about opportunities for continued engagement with daCi. We believe that making sure students know that what they think is important is very powerful.

Our first step in collaboration was to establish practical communication protocols. We decided to utilize Facebook, and created a private group for the 10 members plus Liz Melchior (Springboard liaison to the Executive Committee), and Maria Speth (Chair Elect to the Executive Committee). Through online discussion, thematic ideas for the forums were decided on as a whole group. However, after a period of communication through email, Facebook messages, Skype meetings, and shared documents - in order to address challenges of time zones and busy schedules - we decided to separate into smaller subgroups for the development and implementation of each forum. The groupings were created within regional areas (as much as possible) resulting in the following subgroups: Denmark-4; USA/Netherlands-3; Australia-3. The following proposed outlines were developed by each subgroup, and represent the initial ideas for each forum.

Youth Forum Outlines

Ages 8-13:

100% daCi (Inspired by performance 100% by Rimini Protokoll)

Facilitated by Maja Bond-Holtz, Micaela Kuhn-Jara, Riika Laurilheto, Mette Overgaard

This forum would start by asking the students some general yes/no questions regarding identity and dance. Some questions could be: Where do you dance? Do you dance more than three times a week? Can you talk about dance with your best friend? Do you see yourself having a future in dance? Do you sometimes get tired of dance? Do you get nervous when you perform?

The room would be divided into a Yes side and a No side. Instead of answering verbally, students would visually represent their answer by moving to one side of the room or the other. After key questions, students would have the opportunity - through words or movements - to tell the story

of their answer to a partner. After a round of facilitator-led questions, we would open the mic to student-led questions. We would facilitate a summary/reflection at the end to acknowledge and value each other's different realities and perspectives.

The Poetry of Motion: Creations Inspired by Dance

Facilitated by Paige Horton, Meggi Sweeney Smith, and Nele Vandeneede

This workshop would offer time and space to create works of poetry, prose, and art as an individual and/or in pairs/groups, which document their feelings about dance and the role it plays in their lives. We would begin the workshop with guided sharing and discussion time, where we encourage brainstorming about how to communicate what dance means to us without using movement. After the workshop, students' creations would be displayed for the rest of the conference to enjoy.

Ages 14-18:

Danceoke / Dance-Karaoke

Facilitated by Maja Bond-Holtz, Micaela Kuhn-Jara, Riika Laurilheto, Mette Overgaard

Modeling the traditional Karaoke format, students would dance what they see instead of singing it. An opening video would present a compilation of examples of the last century of dance to generate discussion about media and dance as it relates to dance history, and posing the questions: What does video do to dance? What problems can it create? Does video create easy access to dance? What IS sharing dance through media? The forum will also serve to encourage good/positive behavior online.

Ideas for the video compilation: *Fred Astaire, Tiller Girls, Michael Jackson, Martha Graham, Saturday night fever, Ballet, Beyonce/Single ladies, Bollywood, Gangnam style, Soulja boy, Sia/Chandelier, MC Hammer, Madonna/Vogue, etc.*

So You Know You Can Dance, Now What? (SYKYCD)

Facilitated by Paige Horton, Meggi Sweeney Smith, and Nele Vandeneede

This workshop is a forum for students to discuss how they see dance as a part of their future. We would talk about why students dance, what inspires them, what keeps them coming

back to the studio or the stage, and how they can turn that passion into a career, or how they can continue to be involved in the wider world of dance (ranging from administration, to production, to teaching, and beyond). We will also provide a safe space for students to talk about concerns they may have about pursuing dance as a career, to talk about why dance is an important part of their lives, and how it affects (positively and negatively) other aspects of their lives.

Reflections

The following reflections are divided by age group, highlighting important elements; documenting examples of student work during discussion and small group investigations; and concluding with a broader perspective on the successes and challenges encountered. Each forum was attended by 35-45 students, between the ages of 8 and 18 years old, representing 12 countries. Because of limited space during the congress, student groups were given a specific number of 'tickets' to the Youth Forums. This resulted in smaller groups than we anticipated, based on Youth Forum attendance at previous conferences.



Youth Forum participants.

Ages 8-13:

100% daCi and The Poetry of Motion

The forums for the younger population demonstrated greater challenges overall, as a result of two main factors: Language barriers and schedule.

While we had expected some difficulty in verbal communication, and planned for it with icebreakers and less discussion-heavy activities, it turned out to be a bigger issue than we had anticipated. We were able to respond to the language barriers by utilizing the diversity of the Springboard. Because the entire Springboard was present for each forum (even if they were not lead facilitators), those with the needed language skills were able to step in and translate. Additionally, forum participants who had a stronger command of English assisted their peers. Regardless, we observed that the moments students were moving, speaking in their own language, or expressing through visual representation, were the most successful in both forums.

Secondly, the conference schedule was particularly difficult for this age group in terms of energy levels and stamina. They were dealing with the effects of international travel, especially since the forums took place during the first two days of the conference, and were held later in the afternoon after a full day of dance workshops and lunch. In addition to the lower energy, students were still learning to navigate an international conference - experiencing the nervousness and shyness that first accompany getting to know peers from other cultures and groups. While students seemed somewhat reserved during the short period of time that we worked with them in the forum, we feel that they left with the tools and greater confidence to make new friends and connect with each other throughout the following days of the conference.

Despite these challenges, the students were still engaged and connecting with each other. In *100% daCi*, one of the most successful elements was the use of an “ice-breaker” group activity - incorporating a simple movement integrated with their personal language. This was returned to at the end of the forum, and reprise demonstrated an increased sensitivity to others as a direct outcome of the forum content. Additionally, the use of groupings in space during the *Yes* and *No* answers allowed students to perceive similarities and differences with those around them, without the need for language.



100% daCi participants

Taking a different approach, *The Poetry of Motion* engaged participants in expression through the visual arts as an avenue to creating dance. The use of smaller groups also provided opportunities for students to become better acquainted with each other. We found that the students were eager to engage with the art materials provided - it seemed to be a release for them. One successful way that this forum facilitated connection between the youth and adults at the conference was that we were able to display the students' visual process by hanging their drawings in the conference venue.



Visual art from *The Poetry of Motion*

Ages 14-18:

Danceoke and SYKYCD

The forums for the older population felt more successful in terms of engaging students in dialogue and self-reflection. Students at this age, across the board, were more comfortable communicating in English, or volunteering opinions even if their English was not fluent.

We also found that our expectations of how these forums would go and what students would get out of them was more in line with what actually happened.

That being said, we were still pleasantly surprised by the maturity and consideration the participants brought to their responses and questions.



Danceoke participants dancing to Martha Graham and then Gangnam Style.

Danceoke was a fun mixture of movement and small group discussion, and the students were open to the new experience of “dance karaoke”. Students were very interested in the subject of dance and media, media in dance, etc; it is clearly something that is integral to this generation’s experience of dance and personal identity.

The following questions were posed during the small group discussions after dancing along to the mash-up video of dance through the decades, starting with Isadora Duncan and ending with Gangnam Style:

- What was the difference between the first and last videos?
- Is it important to document dance and why?
- What videos are you inspired by?

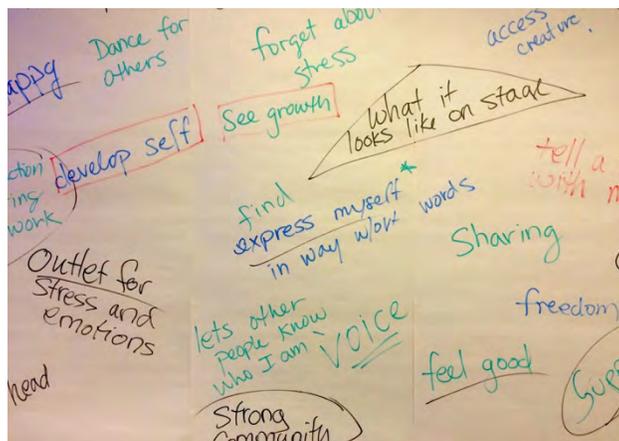
Some of the key ideas that resulted from our group discussions were:

- Documentation is important for future generations to know what happened; to record what’s happening now; as a self-reflection process; and as a way of connecting to past generations or other cultures in order to inform your practice.
- There is a challenge within this platform, as it creates hierarchies within dance and presents a place for judgment to be shared without accountability.
- There is less contemporary work online- mainstream media is mostly populated by hip-hop or commercial dance styles.

- Social media is very fast paced, and it takes effort to keep up with this, and truly understand what one is seeing.
- Incorporating media in dance can help attract new audiences and lead to new creative invention.

One of the things that came out of the discussions that we found surprising was that YouTube was not a bigger player in student’s daily life. They indicated that it was used to find music or information, but their primary engagement with dance was still through live performance or personal experience.

In “So You Know You Can Dance, Now What?” (SYKYCD), there was a high level of curiosity- students were glad to have the chance to think about dance in the bigger picture of their life and to discuss it with peers and mentors. To begin the workshop, we asked students to think about why they dance. They came up with answers that spanned a range from “dance for others”, to “freedom”, to “self development” and “an outlet for stress and emotions”.



Answers from SYKYCD participants regarding why they dance.

We channeled these responses into subcategories that encompassed related professional fields, and students joined the small group they most identified with or were curious to learn more about: Performance/Choreography, Health/Sciences (Dance Therapy, Physical Therapy), Education/Outreach (Teachers, Community Outreach), Production (Stage), Business/Marketing, and Writing/Research. Because of the diversity of Springboard, we were able to have a lead facilitator

for each small group who had experience in and/or was excited to share their passion for these related fields.

Each group followed a prescribed investigation process looking at:

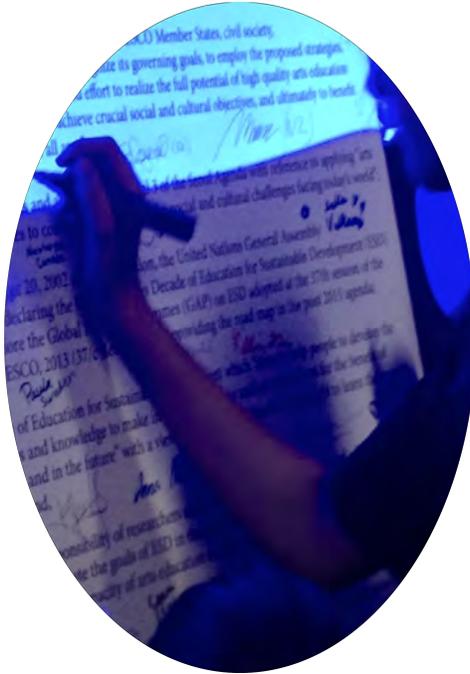
- **Who** these professionals are and what positions they might hold
- **What** skills and knowledge is needed for this field
- **How** they might go about acquiring these skills and knowledge.

Each small group then presented some of their key discoveries to the whole forum. To bring the discoveries to a personal level for each student, we concluded with exit slips, which gave students the opportunity to utilize Springboard as a resource by writing down specific questions they had in regards to their future. Some examples of questions that students submitted were:

- “Ways to get into the research business...like what do I have to take or do to get connections in this field?” (CAN)
- “Where could I study stage managing after high school, and what should I choose to study in high school to continue for stage managing?” (FIN)
- “Will restricting myself to only dance therapy [Dance Physiotherapist] affect my income/opportunities/clientele (instead of overall sports therapy)?” (CAN)
- “Do you need a dance education [university] to become a professional dancer?” (DEN)
- “What are the best dance schools in Europe? Where can you minor in dance and major in Bio/Chem?” (SVN)
- “What can I do to further get recognized in dance? If I would like to pursue dance as a career what can/should I do?” (USA)

Those who asked specific questions received a follow up email from the forum facilitators. However, to fully realize our vision for this forum, where Springboard acts as a resource and liaison to the greater field of dance for students, we would have needed an established internet infrastructure (ie. dedicated email address, Forum page on an easily accessible website, Facebook group (not page), etc.) to facilitate continued discussion.

Copenhagen Declaration



An unexpected element that was incorporated into the Tuesday forums - *The Poetry of Motion* and *SYKYDC* - came out of the presentation of the Copenhagen Declaration by Ralph Buck and Erica Rose Jeffery at the conference. There was a desire to create a dialogue with the youth about the declaration and how they are a part of it. For 15 minutes at the end of these forums, Ralph and Erica gave their presentation, afterwards exploring with the students the ideas of community development and sustainability through dance. By asking students to brainstorm on what affects the world on a macro level, they carried them into a discussion about how changing the small, daily actions which affect their lives, can grow and impact their local community, their country, and the world we all live in. At the end of the discussion, they asked students to think about whether or not they agreed with the declaration and invited them to sign a large copy of the declaration if they did.

In a post-forum discussion with Ralph and Erica, we suggested creating a version of the declaration that would be youth friendly and more accessible to non-native English speakers. This discussion resulted in the following:

- We want to empower you and help you contribute to the world (and your community) in a way that will last.
- We want to make sure all children get an equal and open chance to dance, no matter who you are, where you come from, or what you look like.

- We believe you all deserve to be taught by teachers who love dance, love teaching, and are sensitive to your needs as learners.
- We invite you to keep your friendships with people you meet this week and let them grow as you get to know each other better.
- Share dance in ways that help other people!

This version was then hung in the main lobby of the conference venue for everyone to see and respond to if inspired.

Considerations

As we conclude our experience planning and hosting the 2015 Youth Forums, a few successes and future considerations stand out. We found that providing an opportunity for students to really talk about dance and what is important to them was a valuable experience for both the students and ourselves. It is important to remember the international component when planning activities and that the students will have varying levels of proficiency in English. We also discovered that dividing students into only two age groups was a challenge developmentally, and we wondered if adding a middle age group would have been helpful. One element we found missing was an opportunity for follow up or development of themes and ideas with students who participated in the Youth Forums; perhaps seeing the same group of students later in the conference would provide more opportunity for continued engagement. Additionally, the Youth Forums could become an outlet for continuing dialogue with students beyond the conference and keeping them engaged with daCi in the interim years. For this to be successful, a strong internet platform would need to be developed and easily accessible to students.

As adult members at the conference, it was wonderful to have the opportunity to directly connect with some students and engage with them on a more personal level. As facilitators, we greatly appreciated the freedom to envision and implement these forums, which provided an opportunity to present at an international conference. We look forward to seeing how the Youth Forums take shape in future conferences and hope our experiences can inform and inspire the next generation of Springboard members.

Co-facilitators of the Youth Forums were the daCi 2015 Spring Board: Paige Horton (USA), Meggi Sweeney Smith (USA), Maja Bonde-Holtze (DEN), Nikki Caputo (AUS), Cassandra

Giannone (AUS), Micaela Kuhn-Jara (DEN), Rikka Laurhileto (FIN), Mette Overgaard (DEN), Nele Vandeneede (NET), Emma Warmington (AUS).

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Paige Horton (BFA, MA) and **Meggi Sweeney Smith** (BFA, MA) are freelance dancers and dance educators in New York City. Paige and Meggi are currently serving as co-representatives (USA) on the inaugural daCi Springboard, and recently developed and facilitated a *Day of Dance NYC* at NYU Steinhardt for local school children and educators. Paige is working with middle and high school students at Dancewave in Brooklyn and is serving as secretary for daCi Executive Committee. Meggi is teaching at the collegiate level, serving as an adjunct at NYU Steinhardt and William Paterson University (meggisweeney.com).