



DANZ

Community Dance

- A Resource File

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In this resource file I open up issues to do with community dance:

- definitions and conceptual thoughts,
- basic issues of group set-up, for people who are starting on their journey into the exciting realm of community dance,
- practice examples from my own work during my time in New Zealand.

I hope that this file will be brought to life, and that it expands with your breath, as you add ideas and examples to it. New Zealand already has many exciting examples of community dance practice, and a file like this one can help to highlight the practices many of us are involved in (send your project examples to danz@danz.org.nz).

Dancing Definitions

There are many different definitions of community dance. 'To nail it down', to define, is an act that opposes many of the principles of community dance work itself, at least in my understanding of it. Thus, I invite you to approach definitions as journeys, different paths, ways of moving. In the following, I am sharing some way-marks in my journey of understanding the concept. I invite you to create the coordinates of your own provisional map of community dance, appropriate to your communities, their needs and expectations.

I understand community dance to be movement work that facilitates the creative expression of a diverse group of people, for aims of self expression and political change. Community dances are **communally created**, they are not individually authored. The end product, if it comes into existence, is not predetermined by an artist who directs and choreographs people towards this goal. Instead the outcome is (relatively) open, maybe within a thematic field opened up by the facilitator, but full of spaces and times for people to create their own expressive material. With this approach, community dances challenge conventional performance aesthetics.

Equally important, in my definition, is that community dance's power rests in **process rather than product**; in the act of working and moving together, allowing different voices, bodies and experiences to emerge. A new way of understanding 'art making' can emerge from this: an aesthetic of access that redefines who can dance, what dance is, the nature of beauty and pleasure, and appropriate ways of appreciating dance. These expanded concepts of dance making can impact community performance in many ways. For instance, many community dance practitioners work through workshops or series of meetings, rather than through rehearsal periods and pre-set performance dates, and boundaries between dancers and audiences can become fluid and open. Many community dance events find new ways of sharing the excitement of performance, bringing creative experiments into communities.

Here is what UK dance professional Anthony Peppiatt writes about community dance:

Territory

The territory of community dance activity is everywhere except professional dance performance. The driving forces in the world of professional dance performance are essentially different from those in community dance. Community dance involves all dance activities at every level but not professional dance performance. Professional dance performance has important links with community dance activities but is essentially focused on professional performance itself (training, creation, performance and touring).

This distinction can be summarized as:

Professional dance performance = Everything FOR performance (training, creation, and touring)

Community dance = Everything AND performance (activities that do not always lead to performance and performances that are not professional)

Purpose

The essential purpose of community dance activity is to increase access to dance – through experience and participation – for the benefits of all kinds of people.

Process

The main 'product' of community dance is the process in which participants are involved.

Diversity

Community dance embraces diversity, involving every dance style and everyone in the whole community (inclusive of class, age, ability, gender, sexuality and race).

Economy

Community dance broadens the arts economy through partnership with a greater range of funders, without the commercial motif of profit.

Anthony Peppiatt: 'What is a Framework And Why Does it Matter'
Thinking Aloud. In Search of a Framework for Community Dance.
Leicester: The Foundation for Community Dance. 1996 : 2-3, 3.

I would add another two to Peppiatt's categories:

many (but by no means all) community dance artists challenge dance practice beyond the category of 'amateur' dancing, and destabilize the boundaries of professional and amateur, 'proper' stage and alternative venues, and the place of dance in culture.

As a second category, I would add politics. Many community dance practitioners (and again, not all) move towards changing wider issues in the world through participatory dance making. Various expressive art therapies, including dance therapy, usually aim to enable change within an individual, so that this individual

can function better within the already given social world. Community dance, on the other hand, often aims to enable change both within individuals and within wider social structures. In some form or other, many community dance practitioners understand their work to be a form of **political labour**: facilitating creative expression as a means to newly analyse and understand life situations, and empowering people to value themselves and shape a more egalitarian and diverse future.

Dancing Practice: Setting up Projects

In this section I highlight three areas of concern for people ready to begin running community dance projects:

- finding a group
- introductory remarks on access issues
- thoughts on performance in community dance.

There are many other areas to think about: networking, publicity, grant writing, evaluation, coping with group issues, professional development, and others.

Finding a Group

Ideally, a project emerges from a community need and communal decision, and you and others might lead sessions because of a mandate given to you by the group. This kind of close-knit relationship is not always already established, and you might need to find other ways of building your community. For this chapter, I assume a different scenario: you are in search of a group to work with. You might have a first idea, a theme, or else a festival that's coming up, a local celebration, or the charge to work with a particular group of people. Where do you go from there?

With whom do you wish to work? Why? Do you see yourself as part of the group? Are you a member of a neighborhood, an 'identity group', a community of interest, a person associated with a school, a retirement home? Think about the network you are part of yourself: what kind of people does your life touch?

'Ready-Made' Groups

Community Arts Centres

Hospitals

After-School Clubs

Political Party Offices – in a place like this, you might get good leads to people who wish to work actively in community settings, addressing a particular issue

Retirement Homes with Meeting Places, and regular organised events who might look for a community artist/ animator
Hospices who might work with volunteer personnel
LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) groups, or other groups organised around a specific pride issue
Diasporic Groups
Drop-In Centres (whether focused on drug issues, mental health, women's centres, youth centres)
Miners Welfare Halls or other organisations and spaces associated with specific community groups
Horticultural Societies (great for landscape/garden projects)
Adult Education Centres
Bartering Societies (arts services and the provision of specific experiences can provide a useful barter item)
Church Groups
Marae Organisations
Farmers' Organisations
Student Groups
Dieting Clubs
Sports Clubs
Parent/Teacher Associations
Local Amateur Theatre Associations
Choirs
Charities
Any group or organization that meets regularly or has multiple contacts, has dedicated members who are already interested in grouping together around a specific topic.

With all of these groups, make sure that your aims and politics are well aligned with the groups and their agendas. Researching a group's support system, funders, founding members, trustees etc. will give you a good sense of their potential direction, but an actual chat with current group members will also be very useful before approaching them with a specific project idea.

If you do not identify as a member of the particular grouping you plan to work with, what are your motives for your wish? Remember that the notion of 'group-membership' itself is fluid, and that alliances are formed strategically. Clarifying your motives is a useful step towards shaping your idea, preparing the ground for the interaction with participants, and also for creating language that can be useful for funding applications. Often it is hard to talk about dance making: many of the specific pleasures and opportunities dance provides do not translate easily into words and statements. Creating a plan will help all of you; yourself, the group, funders and other stakeholders, to become more comfortable with dance as a significant life activity.

Access

Thinking about access issues grows out of an ecological awareness: an awareness that there is more in the world than your own experience and life-circle. Most likely, you will want to work with people who are not all like yourself. At the same time, we all know most about our own comfort zones, and our own ways of communicating and inhabiting space. If you want to actively grow your community, and invite others in, you need to think about the assumptions of access that underlie your project.

Gather (or think back on) any community dance announcements you've seen or heard recently. What are the assumptions of access both in the announcements themselves and in the activity they are advertising? Think about:

- ability to read
- ability to use and access a telephone
- ability to use and access a computer/internet/email address
- ability and willingness to spend a certain amount of money as participation fee or for transport
- ability to find child care
- ability to access a certain space – where note is displayed, and where activity takes place
- ability to communicate in a specific language
- availability during certain time slots – who can best use certain time slots such? What assumptions do the chosen times make? What tacit assumptions about religious practices and familial availability does the day of the week make?
- ability to work in certain group sizes
- access to a car/public transport/group van

Access and Disability

One large component of access thinking focuses on disability, impairment and access requirements. The single most useful piece of information about good ways of ensuring access is: when in doubt, ask.

If you want to make a community dance session accessible to people who have mental health diagnoses, ask them. What does it take to make you comfortable with a space, an environment, a group? The answer will most likely depend on a huge number of factors, and will be specific to the group you are working with.

When I was a wheelchair user, I tended to answer questions about necessary access depending on the resources available to the person asking, and to the status of the institution represented. Thus, I would feel comfortable with a single step and no properly accessible restroom for a visit to a low-budget local performance group, but I would expect full access and code specifications when I was asked to participate in meetings with local governments.

Clearly, there is a political component to access provision, and to the struggle over right of access. Community performers do well to remember that the issue of access isn't neutral, or specific to getting one individual into a building, but that the issue speaks about exclusion and decades of discrimination.

Here is a small sample of potential access issues relating to two different kinds of impairment groups. In all cases, asking, and working with people's wishes, tends to be the best policy.

Access Issues in relation to Mobility:

- Parking
- Length of paths inside and outside buildings
- Stairs/Elevators/Escalators
- Width of doorways (different requirements for manual and power wheelchairs)
- Flooring (thick carpet isn't a good surface for manual wheelchair users, as it grips the wheels, and waxed parquet or linoleum can be hazardous to people using sticks, crutches and walkers)
- Toilets (low or high toilets, handrails, placement of mirrors, accessibility of faucets, also: if you are running a dance class where you are expecting a good number of wheelchair users, is there more than one accessible restroom within easy distance?)
- Stamina: many pain, or energy, related conditions mean that people find it hard to stay in one position for a long time, or to work continuously for certain periods. Breaks, and comfortable resting places can help with this. You are a dancer: you do not need to treat bi-pedal standing as the 'normal' neutral position.

Access Issues in relation to Developmental Impairment/Intellectual Difference:

- Self-advocacy groups such as 'People First' campaign for the use of clear language, icons and images to ensure respectful communication practices. What does that mean for your dance leadership skills?
- Clarity in decision making: who is making decisions? How can decision making be delegated, so that all participants feel ownership of the dance?
- When recruiting for your workshop, how do you negotiate issues of advocacy?
- How can you speak to the people you want to work with directly?
- If you fill in a slot in a day-center, and there are no alternative rooms in this center, are you happy with this, or would you prefer your participants to have a voice in deciding if they want to participate or not?

Access Issues in relation to Cultural Difference

Disability and its cultures provide access issues, but all other cultures and identities have access issues, as well. Different cultures have different ways of dealing with:

- group situations
- social hierarchies
- ways of communicating
- body language
- gender issues
- intergenerational attitudes
- religion and its practices
- personal space
- mobility within urban or rural environments
- stereotypes
- discrimination
- cultural and personal history
- issues of authority

Permission is one issue you might have to consider when working with local myths, stories, legends, with traditional dance movements, or with poetry used in traditional ritual. Is the use you are planning respectful (even if you disagree with the tradition involved)? Will your participants feel uncomfortable or disempowered if you use traditional elements with them?

For members of some cultural groups, including some students in classrooms, engaging in yoga can trigger discomfort. Using a ritual structure such as the Christian stations of the cross in a secular context can be upsetting to some people. Some Australian Aborigines myths are only told under secrecy, without permission to retell them. Sacred sites, whether marae, Celtic stone circles, or pilgrimage routes, mean something to someone, even if not necessarily to you, and if you are planning on using these sites, or stories associated with them, it is sensible to ask for permission before you do so.

If you feel the content of the rites, sites or myths you are engaging with are themselves repressive or in need of change, you can of course create work about that – but you might find it easier to gain acceptance and a positive response if you do not desecrate places and disrespect people who disagree with you.

In all cases, as workshop facilitator you should be conscious of what you are doing, open about your motivations and able to shift and change your ideas in consultation with your participants. This does not mean that you can't address culturally sensitive material, or should avoid points of pressure, it merely means that you should do so mindful of people's feelings and with awareness.

Access issues in Elder work

Do you have set ideas of what to expect of elders (stereotypes)? When you think about these issues rationally, do they make sense? How do you wish to be treated when you get older? Age-related disability access is similar to the issues mentioned in the various lists above, but some issues might be more prevalent:

- Conditions associated with memory loss
- Depression
- Loneliness
- Institutionalisation

In some elder work situations, you might also encounter end-of-life issues.

Access issues in work with children

Structures: think about the way that many children's lives are deeply structured and timetabled. How can your project or workshop avoid being just another task? How can you create a space apart?

Laws about working with children often change, and the specific provisions made can sometimes be in conflict with dance's kinesthetic modes of communication. Make sure to familiarise yourself with any legislation and policy issues regarding contact with children. Depending on where you work, you might need to agree on background checks, on specific gender ratios, leader/children ratios and guidelines for interaction with children. In some countries, cuddling a crying child is not permissible. Once you know all rules, decide if and how you can work under these circumstances.

Performances

Do you wish to perform publicly as part of your community dance project? The answer to this question depends on the definition of performance and audience that your group has settled on. For instance, who is your audience? Think about these different groups:

- the actual group
- a small, pre-selected audience where everybody knows everybody else
- an audience that might include people that hold power over participants, for instance social workers, doctors and other medical personnel.
- a general audience in a live setting
- a general audience, in contact with the group through mediation such as videos and photographs
- a wider specialised audience, reached through material generated as part of the workshops (such as politicians whom postcards are sent to)?

What are the different expectations these various audiences have? How do you as a group need to educate them in order for them to understand the specific issues you want to share with them? For instance, what happens if someone is expecting

something like an amateur production of Swan Lake, and instead is witnessing a circle dance about mythical bird creatures, or a Taniwha story danced through contact improvisation and Haka movements? How can the performance setting, the framing, textual materials or a narrated introduction allow this audience member a way into the experience?

A conventional dance performance in a theatre is not the only way that you can share performances created within a project. There are many reasons why stage performances can be problematic for participants. The theatre as an institution has a history of exclusion (socially, culturally, age-related), and many people do not feel at home in its spaces. Many proscenium theatres create a large distance between dancers and audiences, and this kind of distance might not be of interest to the group. The kind of behavior scripts usually employed in theatre spaces might not be desirable (keeping quiet, sitting still, sitting in the darkness). But there are many other ways in which you can think about performance. Be creative, and add to this list:

Parade through a Town

Bonfire Performance

Masquerade

Picnic

Video Installation

Website

Site-Specific Performance (such as the performers moving with their audience through spaces in a housing estate)

Examples

Project

Coastal Mappings (Petra Koppers)

In 2005, I had the honor to be the first Caroline Plummer Fellow in Community Dance at the University of Otago, New Zealand. During my six month tenure, I facilitated a community dance project that centered around a Dunedin hospice, and rippled out from that. As a German woman who comes from a European dance tradition in which storytelling features strongly, I was particularly fascinated by issues of movement and storytelling, and I learned much in my time in New Zealand.

In the hospice, we worked on connections between people and the land. In group and one-on-one sessions of great intimacy and privacy, people at the end of their life-journey shared with me their stories of their homeland, their memories of special places and sense impressions, focusing on aspects of whakapapa (te reo:

literally, genealogy, and also a ritualised form of presenting oneself): our rivers, mountains, and our people. Together, we constructed witnessing photos - images created with a small camera, easily to handle by participants, which captured in some form the experiences we discussed. We photographed small gestures and movements (since some of the participants had very limited mobility, or were lying in hospital beds), and we created small poetic descriptions of these images which I manipulated digitally based on their wishes and ideas. Over a period of a few weeks, we collaborated on the final shape of these images and poems, and many participants gave the final witnessing image to their loved ones. Many of these images hold multiple stories, some for public telling, some not. Most reference both personal experiences, and local legends, both Maori-stories and Pakeha ways of speaking of the land. For instance, we had material that spoke about two different stories regarding the Moeraki Boulders: foodbaskets falling out of wakas, and accretions of stones emerging from the earth and rolling down dunes.

The stories and images created in the hospice rippled outwards, and initiated other movements: in *Dance with a Difference* (DwaD) sessions at the University of Otago Physical Education Department, people who experience pain or stiffness as well as others who were interested in issues of movement and storytelling came together, and we created choreographies in response to the small gestures, movements and images from the hospice. Many of the DwaD participants came from the local Cancer Society, whom I had visited to invite members, and many knew participants in the hospice, creating strong connections across the different project elements.

The ripples moved on in turn. In a sharing at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, the choreographies of the DwaD group, captured in a dance video (videographer Nancy Higgins), and the witnessing images and poems from the hospice provided the material for a performance installation. Members of the public (including family members and friends of people from the hospice) who visited the Gallery that weekend were greeted by the haunting voices of Maori taonga, a putorino and a koauau - traditional musical instruments. Music issuing from a carved albatross bone spoke of connections to the sea, and to the wide spaces of the Antarctic, beyond Dunedin (Otago peninsula has the only mainland nesting colonies of Royal Albatrosses).

People moving into the Gallery saw large video projections of dances, and heard poetic fragments that hold keys to the stories of the witnessing images. They were then invited into a sharing circle. Up to thirty people (in four separate performance slots, plus one longer workshop session) joined hands, some rather bewildered about being asked to dance themselves rather than watching dance. But the gentle flow of movement images and sound that surrounded us seemed to help people to enter into public movement, and all were game. In the circle,

we acknowledged that there were many absent presences: people who had joined and left the circle. And then we danced; together we improvised movements based on one of the stories that had emerged from the hospice work and that had informed the choreographies in the DwaD sessions: the Moeraki Boulders, the Giant under Lake Wakatipu, the Taniwha in Dunedin's harbor, the creation of Aoraki/Mount Cook.

The *Coastal Mappings* project had many more components: workshops in small local public libraries where we discussed alternative modes of storytelling and moved amongst books; sessions at the main Dunedin Public Library where we set up Story/Movement exchanges, where people received a dance movement in exchange for a story and where these movements and stories were collected in dances that snaked in and out of the levels of the library and into the surrounding shopping area. One other component was particularly powerful to me, a foreigner: I was invited to run one of my dance/storytelling workshops at a four-day Moana House Hui at the Otaku Marae with fifty participants who created dance improvisations, each with a mihi (formal introduction), a karakia (prayer) and a waiata (song).

The final *Coastal Mappings* sharing took place at the hospice. There, we had a hand-over ceremony, gifting copies of the witnessing images to the hospice, and we showed the dance-video we created out of the stories from hospice participants. A beautiful performance framed these events: Hone Makatea, the musician of our video and the performance installation, is also cultural therapist at Moana House, a wairua-based program for offenders. He brought his men to the hospice. They sang waiata for us and shared themselves with the people in the hospice who were moved, and deeply appreciative. Powerful songs echoing through the corridor of the hospice and beyond, up the mountains and down the stream, closed the circle of our project, reminding us of our shared connections to the land.

Some Participant Comments:

'I loved the fact that you got people dancing in the gallery. I liked the fact that you took local people's stories into the main gallery, which was very powerful.'

'This visual representation, I believe, demonstrates how imagery, music, sound and movement can transport the observer on an imaginary waka. The project was able to bring different cultures and people together and boundaries between them were smoothly crossed. Pakeha women were dancing to Maori flutes and Maori words. Young Maori male musicians and singers, just out of prison in a community programme, were sharing their culture and aroha with Hospice clients. A diverse Dunedin community has had a wonderful opportunity to share their experiences and creativity together through the Coastal Mappings project.'

'It is about participation, of ordinary people, making dancing accessible to everybody, bringing it back to storytelling, claiming dance back for everybody.'

Project/Core Session Ideas (ways of organising a session)

Story/Movement Exchanges (Petra Koppers)

At the Dunedin Public Library students in a community dance course engaged with me in a Story/Movement exchange. We stayed in the large, sprawling library that gives out into a shopping centre and spoke to patrons. After asking if they'd care to participate, we offered them a movement for a story. Many people were happy to engage with us, and the students and I received rich life-stories and confidences from children, elders, tourists, and many others. After they shared their story with their listener, the listener offered a movement that honored or remembered an aspect of the story just shared.

Each hour we came together in the library foyer, and shared the stories (those where permission was given to share) and the movements. Members of the public who had individually spent time with us also joined in these sharings. Everybody picked up the movement offered to the tellers by each participant, and translated them into their own bodies, making connections in keeping with the story that gave rise to the movement. We then linked those movements into a choir – a sequence of shared movements, with stations where sequences began and ended, and used them to move through the different levels of the library and out into the shopping center. Movement ideas we used included 'passing a rugby ball with our whole body' (one of the people who exchanged a story for a movement was the son of a New Zealand All Black), 'hiding' (from a sad childhood story one person heard), and 'the lifting of a cloud' (from an immigrant who told of his traumatic fight with the NZ immigration authorities).

This file was prepared for DANZ by Petra Kuppers, a community performance artist, disability culture activist and scholar from Germany. Petra was the first Caroline Plummer Fellow in Community Dance at the University of Otago. As part of that role she participated in the inaugural meeting of a community dance network at a forum held by DANZ at The National Dance Conference – Tuanui Whakamaru Dance Canopy, Auckland, 2005, and led a two-day professional development workshop in community dance in Wellington, February 2006. Petra also wrote a book during her tenure in Dunedin, *Community Performance: An Introduction*, and the material presented in this file is adapted from it (Routledge Press, 2007). Petra has also edited a companion collection to this book with her co-editor Gwen Robertson, entitled *Community Performance: A Reader* (also Routledge, 2007).

Petra is the Artistic Director of The Olimpias, a project series that interrogates community aesthetic, disability culture, performance and new media. She has written books on disability and performance, and on medical performances and contemporary arts. From September 2006 she is teaching at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

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