

Community dance as a democratic dialogue

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Beginning discussions

We write this introduction in May, 2017; less than 24 hours after violent events in Charlottesville, Virginia resulted in numerous injuries, a state of emergency, the death of a 32-year-old woman, Heather Heyer, and renewed tensions and divisions between the American people. This event, unfortunately, does not stand alone as an anomaly. Rather, it is another example of the polarization between people occurring around the globe, where a mentality of ‘us’ and ‘them’, based in fear, ignorance, and ideologies of intolerance permeates towns, cities, and countries.

We – Longqi, Ralph, Rose, and Serenity - as four community dance practitioners and researchers, are in privileged positions of being able to travel to diverse locations around the world, and in turn witness a range of dance and social dynamics. This mobility of our community dance practice overlaps with the very real tensions and divisions occurring in various locations. We have worked with groups in the West Bank of Palestine and Southern Lebanon, as they endure oppression, violence, humiliation, and sometimes statelessness for being born Palestinian. We have sat in meetings in London to discuss the power of community engagement in the arts just hours after a bomb has exploded outside a mosque in Finsbury Park, East London. We have opened shows in the United States meant to celebrate marginalized lives, only to welcome a grieving audience, struck by the killing of Philando Castile only 24 hours earlier. Such experiences have led us to question how the work that we and others do within community dance might intersect with these wider social and political issues. Each of us approach community dance with individual and nuanced motivations. For Rose, community dance is seen as a way to reimagine spaces, dialogue about and with difference, and to have alternative dance encounters with

bodies, places, and politics. For Serenity, community dance is a vehicle for cultural reclamation and the dismantling of systems of oppression on a personal and societal level. Ralph hopes that community dance can better include diverse people within dance activity and in so doing develop more opportunities for people to engage with others and feel part of a group and feel that they have something personal to offer. For Longqi community dance is about doing dance. Doing it for a host of diverse reasons and recognizing that the value of doing dance may be found in respect to better personal and community wellbeing. We all recognize that our nuanced interests hold implications for community dance pedagogy. Given the nature of community dance as an educational space (which is explored later in this article), we are compelled to specifically investigate how community dance and social/political issues may intersect within the realm of education policy.

Each time violence erupts, like the events of Charlottesville or Finsbury Park, articles and commentary follow. Pundits, journalists, and experts grapple with the causes of such violence. They examine the dynamics of these events within democratic societies and try to explain where the breakdown has taken place. Common themes emerge, narratives that perpetrators have been isolated from their communities, that they show a lack of empathy or understanding for other cultural groups, or that the perpetrators view the communities they attack as the ‘other’, different, or less than human, and thus, disassociate themselves from the inhumanity of their actions. While these conversations sometimes feel a world away from the spaces of community dance, they remind us of the humane aspect of our profession. Dancers carry their experiences of the world into the community dance space, including their pain and their vision on how to reconcile said pain. We are affected by these events in indirect and direct ways, and when we enter the working space of dance, we consider the large and small ways that we witness and experience issues of empathy, trauma, and ‘othering’. Most importantly we find ourselves seeking agency to use our skills to do something about systemic challenges to the world around us.

Often, when we travel we encounter experiences that deliver surprises about what community dance might be and how it might occur, while we also find ourselves in

situations where we gain reassurance about why we do what we do. We each come from different cultural backgrounds, and we are of different generations. However, we have found common ground within our practice and critical questioning of community dance. During a trip in June 2017, we travelled from New Zealand to China, Finland, Sweden, and London. Over several weeks we engaged in teaching and research about community dance, and we participated in a conference in Gothenburg, Sweden, with a focus on the theme of dance and democracy. During this time several small, yet significant, events occurred that prompted us to consider community dance in relation to the notion of democracy. More specifically, we are curious about the question: how might community dance have a role to play within fostering democratic values in our world? And how do the rhetoric and politics of various values, along with equality of these values, operate in various community dance contexts?

What became clear over the weeks we travelled and moved between cities and countries, was that there was no definitive meaning of community dance as we observed, talked, and reflected with colleagues, dancers, researchers, teachers, and newly-found friends. We heard explanations such as: “community dance is dance as service”; “it is instrumental value of dance in the community”; “it is dancing communities and communities of dancers”; “community dance is applied dance”; and more. Within this article there will be echoes of the diverse meanings of community dance we heard as we travelled to various geographical locations. In sum, community dance is a socially fluid phenomenon rooted in the values of the community it resides in. Both community dance and democracy hold something in common: they are capable of reflecting the values of their communities.

This article explores the values that bridge community dance and democracy. These values appear in various ways in the discourses of democracy, community dance, and policy. We will delve deeper into some of the values as they exist within our field of community dance. We do this to explore whether the ways the values are taught and transferred can have democratizing effects that benefit a democratic society as a whole.

Dancing democracy

We are not alone in our quest to further understand how dance, and particularly community dance, may play a meaningful role in fostering community and with it social justice, ethical practice and acknowledgement and celebration of difference, indigeneity, and cultural practices. Scholars such as Stacey Prickett (2016) discuss the capacity for dance to call out social injustice and to provoke further conversation about the impact political systems have on issues of social equity. Conversely, Rowe, Martin, Buck and Anttila (2018) show us the mutual relationships between dance and social climate, as they explore the effects of fluctuating US and UK politics on dance education. Through studies like these it is clear that dance can be affected by the socio-political situation within a community, just as it can potentially affect the socio-political situation within a community.

As Ann Daly (2002: 9) explains “[e]mpathy is another link between dance and democracy.” In and through movement there is the potential that we can *feel* empathy with others. This collective moving together may allow for space to emerge that *is* democratic. This is a space where feelings can be shared in a non-combative, non-threatening way; and where meaning can be deliberated in a forum conducive to the practice of democracy, and subsequently, where meaning can be generated together facilitating a collective strength. The notion of empathy, non-combative spaces, and deliberative forums as conducive to democracy would outline the fact that democracy is not as simple as a ‘majority rules’ process. This is evident by the previously mentioned tragic events, wherein the oppression of the minority has clearly threatened the fabric of democracy. In a dance dynamic where collectively-generated meaning and strength becomes a primary focus and not just a by-product, we see many of the same principles that uphold a democracy; collective meaning is most thoroughly created through equitable collective input. There is the potential that dance, perhaps more than any other discipline, can support a democratic philosophy at the deepest level, due to the notion that “[t]he body is a social phenomenon” (Schilder, 1950: 217). The cooperation needed in a

dance space, and particularly the cooperation and practices needed in a community dance space reflect many of the same aims and values as a democracy.

Democracy as a theory centres around the concept of each person within society having a voice, and of decisions determined by the collective voices of the people (Dahl, 1998: 36-38). However, the real-life consequences when democracy is put into practice lead to concerns around the true fulfilment of this theory. How do we determine which people are part of a given 'society', and thus allowed a 'voice'? Considering the reality of a society that has disenfranchised various groups, how do we empower people, no matter their position in social strata, to take equitable active ownership of the democratic process? How do we teach people with privilege to hold space for those without, thereby supporting the underprivileged voices as well as the democratic practice of every voice having a fair say? All of these issues reveal the actual groundwork that must be done within society to facilitate a healthy democracy. The seemingly simple practice of democracy requires a citizenry that knows how to realize democracy and has been equipped with the tools to do so. There are many factors that feed into a healthy, functioning democracy. But as we witness violent events wherein marginalized populations are further othered, we are compelled to examine what strengths, if any, our discipline of dance offers that are relevant and transferable to the practice of democracy.

We cannot assume that dance and democracy go hand in hand (Rowe, Martin, Buck and Anttila, 2018), and the question can be asked: Can dance really offer democratising effects to individuals, societies, and communities? While a definitive answer to this query is not something we aim to achieve, what we do look to reconcile are the ideologies of community dance, dance education policy, and the ever-increasing challenges threatening democracy within a globalised 21st century world. Simultaneously it cannot be presumed that community dance is a transformative medium for all (Houston, 2005). Rather, it is perhaps more astute to examine the potential for community dance values to be integrated into dance education policy, as a means of contributing to the education of a well-rounded citizen.

Robert Dahl (1998) defines democracy in-part as a system that, “provides opportunities for:

1. Effective participation
2. Equality in voting
3. Gaining enlightened understanding
4. Exercising final control over the agenda
5. Inclusion of adults” (37 – 38).

As we watch social and political discourse about hate crimes and abuses of power, we see that the same democracy-defining qualities from Dahl’s description are said to be in decline and under attack. Equally, in education policy, we see similar values consistently listed as important to the development of learners and productive, healthy members of society. The UNESCO Education Strategy 2014-2021 states that “[e]ducation can empower learners of all ages and equip them with values, knowledge and skills that are based on and instill respect for democracy, human rights, social justice, cultural diversity, gender equality and environmental sustainability” (add year: 14). The report goes on to list its strategic objectives to UNESCO’s mission of “Education for peace and sustainable development” (UNESCO add year: 33). The text is rife with an expressed commitment to inclusion, global citizenship, empowerment, and issues of participation and equitable access to education for groups who have historically been marginalized. Similar values are reflected in our home base of New Zealand. The National Curriculum of New Zealand is the statement of official education policy set out by the Ministry of Education. It lists inclusion, equity, and participation among its values and principles. It goes on to convey a sense of importance around the considerations of citizenship and democracy (Ministry of Education, 2007: 9-10). If New Zealand’s education policy is similar to the policies of other democratic nations then it is possible to surmise that policy makers understand on some level, their potential to teach a curriculum to citizens that is integrated with democratic values and practices. It is our hope to highlight for those policy makers, how the dance (as part of the arts) portions of their policies and curricula can be utilized to support this effort. From our standpoint, it begins with the exploration

of the democracy-supporting values and practices that are learned in community dance spaces.

Methodologically, to unpack what dancing democracy might entail within diverse cultural contexts and personal experiences, we chose to take a narrative approach to the reflections. The narratives constructed for this study have been purposefully developed to become central features within the research process. A narrative can be seen as an “oral, written, or filmed account of events told to others or oneself” (Smith, 2000: 328), with the study of the narrative being viewed as an investigation of the multiple ways in which people experience the world (Barthes, 1966; Connelly and Clandinin, 2000; Richardson, 1990).

The narrative method relies on interviews that allow space for the natural way people converse, through memories and storytelling (Bold, 2012). D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly (2000) described narrative inquiry as, “stories lived and told” (p. 20). Additionally, they situate narrative inquiry’s relevance by noting, “if we understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). Concretely, in this article a narrative approach means using the authors’ memories and storytelling to convey the meaning of the stories lived by the authors themselves. These stories relate to the events referenced later in this article, to study how community dance may contribute to fostering democracy, in the face of anti-democratic pressures many societies are facing.

By using our own experiences our narrative inquiry becomes auto-narrative. While certain limitations, common to most qualitative methodologies, arise from the use of our own stories, the narrative approach itself can be affirmed by various constructivist, post positivist, and narrative authorities (Trochim and Donnelly, 2008; Flick, 2015; Green and Stinson, 1999; Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The advantages of using our own stories, or, auto-narratives, are that we can be transparent in presenting the factors that affect our respective viewpoints. Furthermore, we can incorporate our own thoughts and stories as

information sources that tend to be excluded under positivist methodologies that do not permit the use of the author's auto-narrative.

The purpose of our research is to raise the question of whether dance, and more specifically, community dance could have lessons for fostering democracy and democratic practice. The purpose of this research is not to provide comprehensive answers to what those lessons could be or to define how such learning should take place. The purpose is to initiate a discourse.

We investigated this question through gathering auto-narrative accounts that we wrote. Through the narrative approach we aim to achieve some insights on the question by viewing these stories through the lens of inclusion, participation, and empowerment, three principles also underlying democracy, which we identify from our review of the literature.

We analysed our stories through the tools employed in narrative inquiry. The transformation of narrative accounts into text requires complex decision-making. As Catherine Kohler Riessman (2005) explains, narratives do not speak for themselves, "they require interpretation when used as data" (2). The researcher's role is to interpret the underlying themes and concepts of the stories (Riley and Hawe, 2005), with these interpretations relating "to the purposes of the inquiry which, at the time of writing, may have evolved from the purposes originally conceived for the project and in terms of which much of the data was collected" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990: 11). In this regard, we identified the underlying themes and concepts in our stories with the aid of literature from both the community dance and democracy discourses. Each author constructed their story spontaneously, by way of the authors' own activities independent of this article. For that reason, special care is taken to ensure the applicability of these stories to the present inquiry, much as they would be for interpretations of information collected in cases where the purposes of the inquiry evolved since the time of information-collecting.

Relevant conclusions could be drawn up by construing and analysing the four stories in this paper to extract insights regarding identified themes integral to both community dance and democracy. Participation, inclusion, and empowerment are identified as key themes common to both community dance and democracy. These themes were identified through comparing literature on democracy and democratic principles with literature in community dance identifying empowerment, inclusivity, and participation as core values of community dance.

Stories of community dancers in the field

The lived experiences of community dancers can tell us a great deal about the values and practices of the community dance field. Community dance is a young discipline, and it is highly social (Amans, 2018: xii). As a result, the unified characteristics and values of this art form are often more accurately found in the living, breathing, work of its contemporaries. Texts are working to catch up and to codify the realities of those involved in the field. To best understand the values of community dance and the ways in which those values manifest through practice, we see benefits in consulting personal experiences as well as key scholarly texts. We offer our personal accounts, hoping to illuminate different ways in which community dance reveals its values and practices.

Longqi's story

I had five-minutes to teach a 'Community Cha-Cha' during a symposium at the Dance and Democracy Conference in Gothenburg. I was excited to stand in front of many dance professors and practitioners and share my dancing. As I counted the timing and introduced dance steps, everyone actively came to join the dancing community. Although we only did basic twists, left and right movements, people seemed to enjoy it. I noticed that they were laughing and smiling as they moved.

In this five-minute window of dancing, we danced not for the purpose of competing or showing off. We danced for happiness. As a ballroom dancer, who has had over 12 years

of professional dance training and education experience at the Beijing Dance Academy, China, I had an 'ah-ha' moment where I realized there were no necessary connections between dance quality and happiness. Simple movements can make people very happy. In this context, the Cha-Cha dance was only an 'excuse', 'opportunity', or a 'chance' to bring people together. In a world of 'alternative facts', it was perhaps a way of offering people an 'alternative way' to communicate with others. Community dance values people (Bartlett and Stenton, 2009). Because of this event, I felt our relationship became closer. A very interesting phenomenon I noticed was that after the dancing, many participants kept talking with each other, and I saw that some of them talked with body language when they sat down again. Walking from the stage to my seat, I heard diverse conversations, "it is a good exercise, isn't?", "Hi, I'm Christine from ... and where are you from?". When I returned to my seat a lady who was in front of me turned back and said, "Thank you for your teaching. It's very interesting!". Receiving a comment like this meant a lot to me. It was warm, encouraging, and trusting, exuding satisfaction and friendship. I suppose this is the meaning of community dance. Although it was a very small moment, I could only think, "Imagine how beautiful the world might be if everyone could have a small moment like this?".

Ralph's story

We had just finished a two-hour meeting with dance academics at Zhejiang Conservatory of Music, Hangzhou, China. We were walking to a taxi in the misty rain, when I softly said to Longqi, "I don't think we share the same views of dance yet", referring to the institution I was coming from and the institution we had just visited. Longqi walked silently and then said, "Yes, it's an attitude that is different. I think teaching community dance requires a particular attitude. An attitude that values the process or the method". The taxi swiftly took us to our favourite cafe in Hangzhou, and it is here that we unpacked his words about 'attitude' and 'method'. I repeated, "Is community dance all about having a specific attitude?". Longqi replied, "Well yes, it is how you teach. What do you say – process, yes, the process, the journey, like us now, the travelling and also the arrival". I reply, "Yes, we will arrive at our destination. We complete the task, but it

is how we travel, what we do and see along the way that is of equal importance. How we teach and learn is as important as what we teach and learn”.

Rose's story

In drizzly rain my colleagues and I walked down the 'Champs-Élysées' of Gothenburg, towards the city centre hazed grey in the distance. Having spent the day at the Nordic Forum for Dance Research Conference, sitting and listening to presentations, there appeared to be an energy to move within the group. Conversation was lively, and gestures were large. As one of the group members said goodbye to catch a bus he broke into a few slow and controlled movements as a departing farewell. Another group member joined him. They interlinked arms, continuing to move with care and consideration for each other, extending limbs and contracting torsos. A passer-by stopped and watched with curiosity, some people quickly pulled out their mobile phones and began filming. As this spontaneous dance moment continued I thought about something I had heard earlier in the day; in Sweden, there is a controversial law that bans unlicensed dancing in public where an individual makes movement beyond a 60-centimetre space. This dancing had gone well beyond 60 centimetres - would my colleagues get away with this?

Serenity's story

“Come up! You have to come up to dance!”. Despite seeing each other dance for four days straight, cheers still erupted spontaneously when one of us stepped into the centre of the room and began to move to the music. This was the fourth evening of merry making, sort of a nightcap to each full day of workshops at the Funoon dance retreat in Morocco. People from Slovenia, UK, the USA, and Belgium came to Essaouira, Morocco for seven days of North African and Middle Eastern dance. We experienced dance through taught workshops, performances, and participatory activities. Our dance education was further contextualized through cultural information provided in each workshop, personal conversations with instructors and fellow students, and demonstrations.

The most pivotal element in the Funoon dance retreat, the thing that transformed meeting rooms, and instruction, and itinerary into a fully immersive experience, was the inclusivity embedded into every aspect of the program. Attendees weighed in on all aspects of the retreat, from the location of the event to the amount of historical content included in the workshops. Students and instructors sat with each other during meals and performed alongside each other in the evening. No one was left out of an activity or conversation, unless they chose to have some solitary time. This seamless dynamic of participation and inclusion throughout the retreat empowered attendees to dig into deeper conversations. People moved beyond the confines of the classroom and engaged teachers with additional questions about Moroccan folk dances days after the workshop had been taught. Discussions about cultural responsibility when performing marginalized art forms took place at the dinner table in tandem with discussion about people's favourite type of wine. In these moments, people were empowered to make education, cultural competency, inclusion, and participation as naturally a part of their decorum as passing the merlot.

Our stories reveal a number of values that are integral to both community dance and democracy. However, three themes that stand out are participation, inclusion, and empowerment. These qualities are discussed extensively within the context of community dance and within the context of democratic nations seeking to address inequities within their citizenry. In both contexts, the discussions point to participation and inclusion of diverse populations as important. Empowerment is regarded as key to participation. As community dance researchers, we explore how these qualities are modelled within the community dance environment, and whether they can have democratizing effects on the behaviours of participants that extend past their community dance involvement and into their lives as citizens. Finally, we explore how the transferable and democracy-conducive work of community dance may be applied to education policy.

Modelling the practice of inclusivity, participation, and empowerment

Empowerment, inclusivity, and participation are core values within the culture of community dance (Amans, 2017; Bartlett and Stenton, 2009). All of these ideas, when put into practice, facilitate or support democratic processes in their community. This begs the exploration of the question; can the community dance setting be a training ground for a democratic society? This is an important exploration because democracy requires ideas not to simply exist in their theoretical form, but to be practiced. For example, it is one thing to believe in inclusivity, it is another to actively help to create an inclusive society, in both small settings and large. The practices of inclusivity, supporting participation, and empowering groups of people all need to be learned, and the community dance environment may be an environment in which people can learn them.

In the community dance space, inclusion is modelled through engagement with diverse populations in society, and it is modelled within the dynamic of the typical dance group. Studies about community dance consistently show practitioners creating and utilizing inclusive dance environments to engage people from frequently ostracised populations such as the elderly and the disabled (Amans, 2013; Beeston, 2014). It is also common in community dance environments that a deliberate value and effort is placed on making all participants feel equally included. In their most recent annual report, the People Dancing: Foundation for Community Dance identified ‘inclusion’ as one of its main highlights (People Dancing, 2016). Publications on community dance pedagogy consistently discuss ways to make students feel included throughout their experience (see for example: Amans, 2017; Chan, 2017; Poynor and Simmonds, 1997).

In Longqi’s story, inclusion looked like a room of people bonding and relating over the shared experience of learning a dance. The participants learned as much about each other (if not more) than they learned about the dance. Their enjoyment of the overall experience depended more on their ability to engage with each other, and their comfort engaging with each other came from the inclusive nature of the space. By de-prioritizing the perfect execution of the dance, the activity leader allowed participants to be less concerned about hierarchies within the dance space and less concerned about whether they’d be distracting fellow participants from learning the dance. With less concern about

perfecting the dance, attention could open to enjoying each other's company. In this sense, the leader set in motion a different goal of fun, which the group responded to by engaging with each other. As Ralph's story references, community dance is sometimes discussed for its 'process'-focused approach and its 'attitude'. The act of centralizing the experiences of the participants had an effect of placing everyone's experiences on a level playing field. As it applies, that equality has a way of creating an inclusive 'attitude' because people within the space know their experience to be as important as the person(s) next to them, they know they belong in this space equally. What is also important is that inclusion was not achieved by a single leader mandating it. Rather, inclusion was achieved by the behaviours of the entire group. The community dance space is a social setting that often involves a revolving door of participants, so it is crucial for virtually all participants to show a genuine appreciation for all who wish to take part.

Participation is integral to community dance. Sarah Houston (2005) notes that participation is one of the main principles community dance is founded on, and that this quality is, in part, the reason community dance has become an inclusive space for typically marginalized populations. Studies such as that of Foster, Golden, Duncan and Earhart (2014) show how participation in community dance can spur increased activity in other aspects of participants' lives. If participation is key to defining the concept of community dance, it would be appropriate to consider the community dance space as a place where people can experience an environment that supports participation of all individuals. In a space like this people can experience what it means to support others' participation, what it means for them to actively participate, and how to share a space that remains conducive to group-wide participation. The dancers in Serenity's story each had moments where they were the central focus, where the entire group listened to them speak and watched and supported them while they danced. Despite there being no official rule communicated that everyone would get a chance to be the centre focus, the participants organically created this environment. By welcoming the participation of all involved and by honouring the space and the needs of dancers around them, the Funoon dance retreat members modelled behaviour that supported equal participation. This did not always mean that everyone danced the same amount or spoke as frequently. Rather it

was the participants' ability to honour and hold space for the unique needs of each participant. Some dancers preferred to sit more than dance and socialize in larger circles of people rather than one-to-one. Some wanted to talk in more intimate circles and preferred to get up and dance when larger group gatherings were taking place. Participation manifested for each dancer differently. The dancers navigated their needs and the needs of everyone around them in order to foster equal participation that left everyone feeling connected and cared for.

It is possible to surmise from the behaviour of participants at the Funoon retreat that this is an example of a community dance space fostering education, inclusivity, and participation. One might argue that the high return rate of attendees is due in part to the empowering effects these qualities have on individuals. Rosemary Lee (2017) writes about the power of participation when discussing the joy and connection of an intergenerational pair of dancers that find common ground despite their differences. Victorino and Greig (2018) point to inclusion as an important element in fostering a learner's understanding and respect for dances from different cultures.

Perhaps for a more concrete understanding of how inclusion, participation, and empowerment are modelled and taught in the community dance space, we might consider the experiences of a typical participant. It is important for them to literally and figuratively share the space evenly, so that they don't bump into the people next to them. Using any privilege they may have to push people out of their space or to dominate the room does not advance their progress or get them desired attention, as it might in other spaces in their lives (e.g. competitive work environments). For privileged and/or oblivious people, this type of community dance environment may be the only regular event in their lives where they get to model acts of inclusion; they include others by giving them equal space and avoiding dominant behaviours which would marginalize and slowly push out other participants.

In moments of less-structured group movement, there are times where the typical community dancer will take centre attention, giving them an opportunity to express

themselves, and be seen by the group. There are also moments where they experience supporting other dancers' time to take the centre of attention. They learn what it is to honour and support others in expressing themselves and being seen. Regardless of whether they like the movement and expression created by each dancer when they take the centre of attention, the participant shows support for the dancer's moment to be seen. In this sense, the community dance participant experiences the act of supporting each person's right to participate by expressing their unique point of view. They model the act of holding space for all participants. When we look at the white nationalists' violent response to protesters like Heather Heyer, we see a group unable to respect the rights of other citizens to participate in a democracy that allows every person to be seen. Heather Heyer's killer was so unwilling to honour space for her to express herself (her participation being a standard value of the democratic process), he took her life. While no single entity such as community dance, education policy, or a civics class is going to reform the behaviours of hate groups, a holistic approach to transferring and modelling democratizing behaviours will go a long way. It is incumbent on every discipline that believes it can have democratizing effects to explore how it can contribute to the civic lives of its participants.

Empowerment is a challenging quality to clearly identify, as an individual can be empowered to be or to do many things. Usually empowerment is measured by the direct admission of the individual (i.e. "I felt empowered by the guidance counsellor") along with some other by-product in a person's behaviour. For example, if a study is looking to prove an individual has become an empowered local citizen, one way they may measure is by observing whether the individual has shown an increased involvement in local town council affairs. Many of the qualities that may indicate an empowered democracy are the same qualities used to indicate an empowered community dance environment. Inclusion and participation are two of those qualities, and have been discussed earlier in this article. Additionally, the very self-reported experience of feeling empowered is a frequent focus for studies concerned with community dance, and studies concerned with a strong democracy. These similar focuses and ideas may suggest that if we are looking for ways to empower a democracy, the community dance environment may offer some ideas.

The word ‘empower’ takes different shapes within scholarship, and it is worth clarifying our use of the word as we apply it in a community dance lexicon. Our use of the word ‘empower’ refers to one party sharing or providing a space for another party to take agency, where they may not have necessarily held agency before. A common example where this applies in a community dance dynamic is the dance activity facilitator relationship with the participants (Chan, 2017). It is a trait of community dance that the facilitator shares their agency by engaging the participants in collective decision making (i.e. open ended activities where the participants can decide a great deal of what they will actually do, engaging participant feedback and changing major parts of ongoing class structure and elements to fit the desires of participants). In short, it is common for the dance activity facilitator to work to democratize a great deal of what is conventionally thought of as the ‘power’ held by a group leader. This understanding of empowerment is integral to community dance, and it is at the crux of our exploration within this article, noting the shared values between the community dance environment and democracy.

In Rose’s story, conference attendees felt empowered to spontaneously engage with each other through dance. Without the context of community dance and unfettered, unchoreographed movement, the dancers involved would not have felt as entitled to express playful and friendly communication. The values within community dance empower people to use dance as a means of engagement with the individuals around them. A network of mutual investment is created through the dancers’ activities that foster a shared understanding that the dancer can take a risk of spontaneous expression within the group. In a similar way a democracy can empower citizens to believe they should also participate whether that is by voting or by more involved means of engagement such as running for office or taking part in civic affairs. An empowered individual will feel that their contribution holds some level of meaning and makes an impact on the community around them.

The learning space of community dance

While research shows community dance to foster inclusivity and participation, and have empowering effects for its practitioners, it is important to note another key feature: the context of the setting in which the community dance activities take place. In each of our stories, the transformative effects of community dance happened in and around educational spaces. Perhaps what is consistent throughout the research we cite, as well as our personal stories, is that community dance always establishes itself in part as a learning space. Longqi's and Serenity's stories took place in spaces where a dance was being taught to participants, which served as a catalyst for their engagement with each other. Rose's and Ralph's stories took place moments after leaving a dance conference, a space for learning and grappling with ideas in the dance field. Their events were continued engagements, sparked by the original learning contexts of the conference.

In learning spaces, participants are primed to take in not only information, but they are also primed to consider and adopt new ways of engaging with each other. Dance education pioneer Margaret H'Doubler strongly believed in the self-discovery and personal growth benefits of dance in the classroom (Hagood, 2001). Her work progressed the discourse around dance as a vehicle to experience personal transformations, regardless of the outcome of a performance. Similarly, Anna Halprin's work, though also associated with performance and not just learning spaces, promoted the belief that through dance, individuals can learn and grow in ways that can effect the world around them (Felciano, 2007). Community dance spaces emulate Halprin's idea, as they are usually spaces that place a greater value on learning and process, regardless of whether the main activity is performance or study or otherwise.

The common experience of community dance as a learning space combined with the democratizing values that are often learned (inclusivity, participation, empowerment) suggests that very little would need to change to utilize it as a training ground for practicing democracy. In fact, it is possible that, as is, the typical community dance environment could be considered to offer democratizing effects on its practitioners. The remaining work would lie in identifying the best ways to integrate community dance practices in appropriate spaces for appropriate audiences.

As stated earlier in this article, the community dance space does not offer a guaranteed transformative experience for everyone. Just as community dance is consistently known for being a learning space, it is also a space defined by voluntary participation. People who are not drawn to dance are less likely to have transformative experiences in community dance environments. However, people who are drawn on some initial level to participate in community dance may experience transformative effects, resonating throughout their engagement with others on a civic and societal level. Just like any educational medium, community dance cannot be all things to all people. Rather its value can be considered based on the breadth and depth of its efficacy, in relation to its costs.

Codifying inclusion, participation, and empowerment in education policy

Earlier in this article we explored community dance environments as learning spaces, where participants can learn values that are equally as important to community dance as they are to democracy. If we are to take that exploration further, to consider how one might utilize the pedagogical benefits of community dance, policy may offer a relevant direction for that exploration. Specifically, education policy is a realm where community dance may be used efficiently to support democracy. Policy fundamentally concerns itself with the values and outcomes it wishes to foster within its learners. An education policy lens would have the ability to look at community dance and see its values and practices more fluidly, potentially extracting the useful dynamics and practices from the very activity of dance. And dance being an art form, it is relevant to narrow the education policy lens further, by considering community dance within the framework of arts education policy. As an integrated part of arts education policy, the community dance model would be channelled through a process meant to make itself as relevant as possible to the needs and interests of the learners, as opposed to being forced on non-receptive audiences. To examine community dance practices through a policy lens may allow for the strategic extraction and application of its democracy-supportive elements – inclusivity, participation, and empowerment.

By understanding the practices of community dance and its democracy-supportive outcomes and values, the policy-maker can apply those practices to the needs of supporting democracy. The community dance space becomes a part of policy that satisfies outcomes that extend past the traditionally prescribed outcomes of arts policy. It now supports any education policy with outcomes that include growing citizens with democratic values.

More research needs to be done to reach consensus on the depths of community dance as a training ground for the democratic values and practices of empowerment, inclusion, and participation. However, it remains worth considering the ways in which these practices could be applied to education policy. We are not policy experts and thus, do not possess all of the background necessary to present a full policy proposal for either UNESCO or for the New Zealand education curriculum. Instead we seek to provide the other half of the discussion, the community dance perspective. Through our observations on the intersections of dance and democracy, we have identified shared values. Through our stories, we have begun to describe the environments where community dance models its values and teaches people to practice inclusion and to actively support participation and empowerment. The next steps to policy exploration lay in collaboration between policy experts and community dancers.

Concluding remarks

Democracy takes practice. The community dance environment is a conducive space to practice the work of creating inclusive, participatory, and empowering spaces. One of the most broadly reaching places where it can democratize the values and behaviours of people is within education policy. While this article does not provide the necessary platform to prove how suitable community dance is as a training ground for all individuals, it can be seen in our experiences and the writings of many other community dance practitioners, that community dance does foster democratic values of inclusion and participation and empowerment.

Phrases such as ‘white lives matter’ and ‘migrants go home’ are degrading to the democratic pursuit of equity and participation, wherein each voice holds equal power. These phrases ignore the cries of marginalized people (such as people of colour and migrants), voices that tell us there is a lack of inclusion, and a disempowering barrier to participation within society. An unequal burden is being placed upon their lives, and thus, democracy is not being realized. The notion that every voice be valued equally is what we are asking for within the practice and philosophy of community dance. Within this we ask that particular care and attention be given to those lives that often fall at the periphery, that are not always fully embraced, that might be considered different. Sometimes there needs to be a reminder about the lives that are marginalised due to age, skin colour, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, physical or mental abilities, health, economics or geographical location. From our lived experiences of doing, feeling, seeing and talking community dance in diverse locations around the world, we posit that the notion of democracy is vital to what makes community dance and dance community – and that community dance may provide tools to foster democratic values.

This research has been undertaken as part of the ArtsEqual project funded by the Academy of Finland’s Strategic Research Council from its Equality in Society programme (project no. 293199).

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