

Reflections on a Caroline Plummer Fellowship in Community Dance project: A circle of life

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the outcomes of a Caroline Plummer Fellowship in Community Dance project that I facilitated for people living with cancer. Through the project people with cancer, or those associated with someone living with cancer, were invited to come together to create and perform a dance through a series of ten weekly sessions titled 'A Circle of Life'. In this article I reflect on the experiences of the participants as they moved from different levels of nervous apprehension to a place of confidence and pride. The project involved collaborations with University of Otago Arts Fellows and community artists as we moved through a ten-week period. The findings indicated the motivation of the dancers to continue attending sessions, despite hardship; their sense of pride in being part of something that was larger than themselves; the way the dance permitted them to embody a sense of courage; and finally, in performing, how they managed to share something that genuinely moved an audience.

Introduction

The Caroline Plummer Fellowship in Community Dance was established in 2003 and honours Caroline Plummer, who died in April of that year. The six-month annual fellowship promotes Caroline's passion for community dance and is open to applications from community dance practitioners, teachers and researchers globally. A wide range of different projects have been conducted, and during my fellowship in 2008, I chose to offer opportunities to the cancer community that allowed creative expression through dance.

My personal background as a high school dance teacher equipped me well in my fellowship. I was always less interested in students achieving a perfect technique than in them discovering a unique creative expression. It is my belief that everyone can dance and through expressive movement, participants may benefit from a sense of wellbeing. "At the heart of the community dance movement lies a set of principles founded on the idea that dance is for everyone" (Houston, 2005, p. 169). In this instance the participants were not 'dancers' in the sense that they had trained for many years and had a good technique, but were

drawn from a specific community, some of whom believed that they had two left feet, to others who may have experienced dance in their childhood. By coming together as a group to express themselves through dance, the participants in the 'Circle of Life' project found strength in themselves that they had not realised existed. The dance appeared to allow some control over their lives when so much had been taken away. The outcomes of Matarasso's (1997) study of participation in the arts supports this conviction: "It can contribute to social cohesion by developing networks and understanding, and building local capacity for organisation and self-determination" (p. 6). The social aspect of moving together with people, all of whom who were living with cancer, provided a place of understanding and support. Houston (2005) discusses a community dance project for elderly people and states, "For some participants, the dance sessions became a support structure, not in terms of empowering them, but as a way of managing things" (p. 172). In this instance, where the participants were facing their own mortality, it appeared that the project gained a natural intensity that did provide a sense of empowerment for the participants. While my project was not intended to be 'dance therapy', the benefits from this community dance project appeared to be therapeutic.

Cancer is a major public health problem in New Zealand with approximately 19,000 new cases diagnosed annually (Ministry of Health, 2009). Having cancer is associated with elevated levels of psychological stress, and physical activity is important for cancer survivors and can lead to improvements in both physical and psychological outcomes (Spector, Deal, Amos, Yang, & Battagini, 2014). However, despite proven benefits of regular physical activity, estimates indicate that few cancer survivors meet physical activity guidelines. The top three barriers to engaging in physical activity include the feeling of being too busy, no willpower, and not liking to exercise in bad weather (Ottenbacher et al., 2011, Ottenbacher et al., 2013). It seems understandable that some may find the physicality alone, especially during illness where energy levels may be low, too hard and a totally unattractive option. Creative expression through movement, however, appeared to be an appealing option for the participants in this project.

Methodology

Using a qualitative descriptive approach (Neergaard, Olesen, Anderson, & Sondergaard, 2009) that leaned towards phenomenology, the experiences of a convenience sample of eight participants from the original group of 17 were

explored. Through an aesthetic awareness of the senses, participants in this study were able to draw on their bodily knowledge in making sense of their experiences. Todres (1998) explains, “If we come to understand in a bodily participative way, there is a sense in which our bodies know more than we do in an explicit way” (p. 125).

A focus group of eight of the original participants met at one of the participant’s homes, providing a relaxed atmosphere over a shared lunch. The group were guided by a series of questions and gentle reminders about the original experience and the ongoing meanings for them. I worked with Mary Butler to code and analyse the themes that emerged (Braun & Clarke, 2006), reaching agreement about themes through an interactive writing process.

Reflection on observations provided support to the findings from the focus group outcomes. There were spontaneous moments that arose throughout the process that were important to document.

Participants

At the commencement of the community dance project, ‘A Circle of Life’, in 2008, 17 participants volunteered to attend. They were mainly contacted through the Cancer Society and were at various stages of treatment (with various types of cancer) or were strongly associated with someone going through treatment (as was Mary with her mother). Mary is an academic working at the University of Otago. She and her mother were participants in my project. Mary’s mother was visiting from Ireland at the time and was suffering from cancer. Mary asked, as a birthday present, if her mother could come with her to a community dance programme that had been advertised for people with cancer. She believed that her mother would not have come otherwise. Mary’s mother agreed and they became participants in the group. After the project was completed, Mary and I reflected on the fact that some powerful outcomes had been experienced that we felt needed to be documented so others could appreciate the power of community dance and the transformations that had been experienced by the participants in the ‘Circle of Life’ project. I had recently lost my partner and my daughter to cancer so this provided me with a particular connection with the participants whose ages ranged from late 40s to 82. There were four men and 13 women amongst the 17 participants, over a ten-week period.

COLLABORATION

From the outset the 'Circle of Life' dance occasioned a multidisciplinary creative collaboration between Chris Watson (The University of Otago Mozart Fellow) and Sue Wooton (The University of Otago Burns Fellow). Chris created an abstract composition for piano and bells to accompany the dance and Sue wrote a poem, 'Fall Sonata, about a friend of hers who was dying of cancer at the time. Her poetry was recorded over the music and this recording accompanied the dance. While collaborations between music and dance or even literature and dance are not uncommon, this was the first collaboration that had taken place between the arts fellows at the University of Otago. The workshops with the participants provided a core focus and each week a group of visual artists would attend the sessions, quietly observing and sketching and becoming accepted as members of the group. During the performance week, the artists held an exhibition of their works that were drawn directly from their observations and experiences over the ten weeks. Above all, the dance participants were collaborators, with each other, with myself and with every other person who became involved. Each of the artist/participants involved informed each other throughout the process. The 'Circle of Life' was the central theme, but the collaboration allowed individuals to create their own work in a manner that was true to themselves and their art form.

The dance itself was organic and was generated without any reference to the accompaniment. The music with poetry was heard for the first time when the dance was ready for performance. The Mozart Fellow, Chris Watson, delivered the music CDs to the dance studio during the session before the performance. The group then rehearsed to the 'Fall Sonata' music, and although there had been no previous consultation, the dance and the music finished at exactly the same time. We hadn't known how long the dance would be and therefore could not advise Chris how long to make his composition. Sue Wooton's poetry was fitted around the musical composition dictating the length to some extent. There was a moment of absolute wonder at the conclusion when everything came together: the music, the poetry, the visual art and the dance. This collaboration was not brought about by the need for support but rather to develop a richness informed by several art forms working together. Laermans (2013) states, the notion of collaboration not only functions as a neutral self-descriptive term but connotes a principal reserve towards the communitarian ethos and the concomitant idea of the artistic collective (p. 94).

The visual artists found themselves creating work that was different to their usual style or medium. Through this particular collaboration, a rich social environment allowed new forms of expression for individuals while supporting and enhancing the expression of the participants who performed in 'A Circle of Life'.

The benefits of community dance for people with cancer

Community dance is an evolving field that is particularly accessible to people whom have limitations imposed by cancer. Community dance places an emphasis on experiential learning, which has broad educational aims in terms of facilitating social interaction and assisting people to be at ease with themselves within a group (Matarasso, 1998). One of the values of community dance with cancer patients is the potential that dance has in appealing to those who are old, sick, isolated and less fit. The focus on dance as a meaningful, creative and social outlet, rather than just being a physical pursuit are reasons why community dance in this instance was such a valuable activity. The participants were connected through experiences "that were achievable, yet testing, over which they had a sense of ownership, control and belonging" (Amans, 2008, p. 6). The participants wanted to be there despite their physical fragility. There was a sense of connection between the people. They appeared to value being there with the others in the group as they talked and moved together. There was no compulsion to attend each session. The participants were there out of choice. Attendance was something that did not come easily and some participants only continued with great perseverance. One participant commented, "You certainly find strength you just never knew you possessed" and this indicates some of the ways that taking part was more or less easy, but always worthwhile. Irene stated,

People had different energies different weeks. If I had a chemotherapy session that week, I had to drag myself there sometimes. A couple of times I nearly got there and I nearly turned for home. But I thought, I'm nearer there than home, I'll keep going.

Irene's emotions were subjected to an external force to fulfil a social function despite a lack of energy. Once she had arrived at the dance studio, Irene's body may have remained low in energy, but as Oliver (2009) states, "Motion and emotion are inextricably linked, and together produce the conditions for vitality to thrive" (p. 103). Irene appeared to have developed an awareness of the corporeal

benefits of dance, along with a desire to move with the other members of the community dance group who fulfilled an important social role.

Expressions of feelings and emotion through dance

The participants in this community dance project, whose bodies had been invaded by cancer, experienced a heightened need to express their feelings and emotions through movement. Although the participants were not dancers in a traditional sense, they overcame the associations they had brought with them about the meaning of dance. For example, Mary arrived and announced her and her mother as two dumpy Irish women. Os, our only male performer, took a long time to grasp the concept that the quality of his dance technique was unimportant and took a long time to throw off old associations of dance. Irene's comments reflect a general feeling at the start: "I was afraid of making a total ass of myself if I am totally frank. Because I thought, I can't move like these people can move. Goodness me, they are going to think, 'What is that lady doing here?'"

In time, however, all the group got over their reservations and described the sense of safety that was engendered by the community dance project. Each week I led the group to develop gestures and motifs that expressed simple ideas related to the richness of the participants' lives or their sense of identity through activities and tasks where the participants themselves provided the movement. The simplicity of the movement vocabulary ensured that each individual was able to fully participate. Dance and somatic knowledge in this project were used as tools to allow expression of feelings, thoughts and emotions. The gestures had a universality, which meant that they did not need to be explained. The embodied expression of symbolic gestures, repeated week after week, eventually led to the increased capacity to make sense of personal situations. One of the group exercises was to create a group tableau from an individual experience. First, each individual member of the group reflected on a significant personal experience. They then shared in small groups with one experience being selected to re-enact in a frozen tableau.

Peggy took responsibility for choreographing her experience of viewing Hayley's comet on a dark night in the country with her late husband. Each week she remembered her choreography slightly differently but she directed the members of her group with the enthusiasm of someone who had taken complete ownership of 'her movement'. Peggy has died since the project finished and as a group member mused on Peggy's passing during the focus group session sometime

later, she expressed that although she felt she knew little about Peggy on one level, she felt she knew her deeply because of sharing her special movements over and over again. She stated:

That scene was so vivid to her; we had to get it right. What it did for me was that I realised you could remember the character and beauty of people you hardly knew. I felt so connected ... You knew Peggy's character and her wackiness and zest for life ... she was so completely alive inside herself. Nobody had told her that she was old.

The movements became symbolic of hope in what Sue Wooton (The 2008 Burns Fellow) identified as “a common experience of bewilderment, helplessness and paralysis when one is faced with one's own mortality or that of loved ones.” It was as though mortality was confronted by the dance. Rachel stated, “Those gestures we made somehow defy death. It doesn't resolve it, it doesn't take it away, but somehow something beautiful is made out of the experience.”

The participants all expressed a richness of experience through dance, which Myfanwy Powell (2010) explains as pleasure gained from an artistic endeavour. She describes an ‘inclusive aesthetic’ as

one that feels truthful, almost painfully real—an aesthetic that provides a more accurate reflection of the wonderful spectrum of human existence, not really a selective or superficial one. Inclusive theatre has the ability to show us who we really are. (p. 198)

The participants shared a need to express their own particular experiences that were not easily shared through verbal exchanges. Cancer causes disruptions to conventional methods of communication as people's societal positions change and where confidence may be diminished. Dance provided a vehicle through which the participants in ‘A Circle of Life’ were able to find some release for their situation. The dance provided pleasure through a creative and expressive outlet where the participants shared personal insights.

Somatic awareness

Having cancer assisted the participants in developing a somatic awareness of their bodies, which in turn allowed them to utilise that awareness when expressing what could not be expressed in words. They moved from a situation of self-judgement to one where they could begin to see the beauty of what others might see in their

performance. Participants were able to embody their emotional and spiritual feelings and give them expression without any fear of judgement. Gradually the gestures became filled with meaning although this was not the case at the start. Irene described how the gestures became a private ritual of release:

The dance for me was about letting the cancer go. Essentially at the beginning it wasn't. But then we did movements and would raise our hands. That was my cancer coming out of my fingertips and flying away. I used it as therapy. The rocking became, yes, this is subsiding, you're going to be better. Peace. Each gesture we did had a meaning.

Eddy (2002) describes how somatic movement disciplines are often associated with health care, and in this instance, the fact that the participants had developed an acute awareness of the changes in their bodies, they were able to move with awareness, not simply by creating meaning through their gestures, but also with care and consideration for what they were physically able to do.

Performance

Although the process and sense of community that grew throughout the ten weeks was at the heart of the project, participants were able to choose to take their work to a performance level and ended up performing twice at the Public Art Gallery and once at a private gallery. The gallery owner, Pauline Bellamy, had led the group of artists who had attended every session to sketch the dancers, and when the dancers performed at her gallery, the art works generated by the project were hung as an exhibition.

The dance performance was envisaged as a celebration, and the bond and support between the participants that had been built during the process was particularly evident in the performance. This was discussed during the focus group. Os was able to communicate how he finally resolved his initial issues about not being able to perform the dance perfectly. There was something about the group process that was able to overcome the inhibitions of even the most intensely self-conscious member. Mary explains:

With music, you are prepared to give it a go, but with dance, you are not prepared to dance in front of people ... I'll dance by myself, but that group made it safe. This was so conscious and you were allowing people to look. There were artists there who were looking.

Irene's comments were shared by the group:

I thought, I've got so much out of these weeks; I've got to see it through, and Elaine felt the same. And once we were out there doing it, it felt totally lifted. It was natural actually, wasn't it Os? It was just wonderful.

Rachel summed it up when she stated, "Wasn't the dance [performance] one of those things that allowed us to say how wonderful we were?" There was almost a sense of triumph amongst the participants, success through adversity perhaps, or a natural high after a performance, but with it came an end to the ten-week process where friendships had been forged. In this instance, the friendships have remained and those who have beaten their battle with cancer continue to meet eight years later.

The benefits of community dance for people with cancer are clear. A question, however, must be asked; how can programmes be set up for people with cancer so that they are ongoing and not reliant on a Fellowship as in my case, or on intermittent funding for short-term programmes? Is it the role of dance educators or artists to set up such programmes or could health professionals include community dance amongst their support activities for clients? Where do we go from here? The length of this article does not allow for further discussion at this point, but there are other considerations. Who should teach such sessions and what should the content include?

Conclusion

Following a 'Circle of Life' performance in the Art Gallery, a lone woman stood in the space. I went up to her and asked if she was all right. She replied, "Something amazing has happened in this space and I want to remain in the energy for as long as I can."

Movement is at the core of all human experience. Body and mind, emotion and intellect are inseparable. The gestures that these dancers developed together were the embodied expression of their shared experiences. The importance of the performance following the community dance experience was spoken about in terms of a bonus or an optional extra, yet it was something that all participants chose to do. The final performance denoted a reversal in the self-image of the Circle of Life dancers, who moved from seeing themselves as suffering, to people who were able to communicate something of worth and integrity.

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