

## Cultural connection: Approaches to cultural education through Latin American dance

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### Abstract

*Latin Dance Party* refers to a tertiary cultural dance unit in Brisbane, Australia, that combines technical/social Latin American dance with cultural perspectives. This article explores the recommendations from two research projects carried out in this unit, over two years, to investigate team-building and cultural authenticity within teaching and learning pedagogies. As a result of these recommendations, the researchers have explored approaches that enhance teacher-student relationships, the development of online contextual resources, and reflective teaching and learning strategies. These approaches have implications for future research into the integration of cultural contexts into dance teaching methodology in university settings.

### Cultural connection: Approaches to cultural education through Latin American dance

University dance teachers need a new agility in how they connect cultural understandings to teaching and learning approaches in the current global milieu (Ashley & Lines, 2016). Shapiro (2008) explains that the changes wrought by globalisation “help us rethink how we value one dance form over another” and require of teachers that they “have the knowledge that enables them to illustrate to their students what these changes might mean” (p. vii). McCarthy-Brown (2017) finds that teachers need to acquire skills that connect authentic cultural practice to the university dance classroom through two pedagogical approaches. In the first approach, “diversifying curriculum”, “educators provide students with multiple perspectives of dance”, which is crucial for challenging “students from the dominant culture” in their pre-conceptions of dance as predominantly a Western cultural artefact (McCarthy-Brown, 2017, p. 11). “Culturally relevant teaching”,

the second approach, “is a method of teaching that adapts instructional tools and content to relate to the cultural affinity of students” and is relevant to “students outside the dominant culture” (McCarthy-Brown, 2017, p. 11). In both approaches, the university dance teacher needs a deep understanding of how authenticity operates in the context of global transculturalism in which hybridity is “the cultural logic of globalization” (Kraidy, 2005, p. xii). While the teacher can implement a pedagogy and curriculum which is as “non-Eurocentric” (Pugh McCutcheon, 2006, p. 217) as possible, working with movement and perspectives which as closely as possible resemble those of the indigenous cultural context, they need to illustrate for the students that the source itself is usually hybrid, and possibly even heavily influenced by Western culture in the way that is enacted in the country of origin. The teacher also needs to acknowledge their interpretive paradigm and how it influences their unique perspective on the culture and dance in question (Pedro, 2017).

The discussion contained in this paper has come as a result of the recommendations made in two separate research projects into the teaching of Latin American dance in a tertiary undergraduate unit entitled *Latin Dance Party* at a university in Brisbane, Australia. The unit is offered by a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Dance) programme; however, it is also an open elective available to any student in the university. Non-Western dance is a particular focus of two units in the degree, with *Latin Dance Party* being one of them. The first research project explored team-building activities as a tool for creating cohesion within the dance cohort, while the second project explored the development of an authentic cultural community of practice within the same tertiary dance unit.<sup>1</sup>

Latin American dance, as distinct from any other dance practice, was selected for these projects because the researchers have expertise in the relevant styles. There is a strong historical and current connection between Latin American dance and the degree programme. This is a reflection of the close ties that the Brisbane Latin dance community has with dance organisations in Latin America, especially Brazil (Pedro, Stevens, & Scheu, 2016).

For the purposes of this paper, and for the specific dance unit that is its focus, ‘Latin dance’ refers to the dance styles of *salsa rueda*, *merengue*, and *bossa nova*, primarily as danced in Cuban, Dominican and Brazilian cultures. ‘Latin America’ is the “term applied to those areas of Central and South America where Spanish, Portuguese and French are spoken” (Robertson & Béhague, 2017, ¶1).

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<sup>1</sup> Both projects were approved by the University Ethics Committee.

There is a problem with this concept in that this “tri-ethnic cultural heritage” is reflected to greatly differing degrees in the culture of one country or region as compared to another (Robertson & Béhague, 2017). Espiritu (1992) explains,

Panethnicity - the generalization of solidarity among ethnic sub-groups - is largely a product of categorization. An imposed category ignores subgroup boundaries, lumping together diverse peoples in a single, expanded ‘ethnic’ framework. Individuals so categorized may have nothing in common except that which the categorizer uses to distinguish them. (p. 6)

The challenge is, however, that the term ‘Latin American dance’ (or ‘Latin dance’) is commonly used outside Latin America, formally in dance syllabi, and colloquially. While using the term was therefore somewhat unavoidable in the teaching of the unit *Latin Dance Party*, it was critically interrogated in activities with the students, demonstrating that Latin America is not culturally homogenous (Robertson & Béhague, 2017).

This paper will discuss the pedagogical recommendations and implementations of both research projects that were embedded within the teaching of the unit, to understand how to further develop and enrich teaching and learning within a Latin American dance context. The discussion is not around the research per se, but how best to use the results and recommendations from this research in future iterations of the tertiary dance unit. The development of online resources that maintain cultural authenticity whilst engaging students will also be discussed. The playful nature of Latin American dance and its strong social connections to the Latin American way of being in the world engender a foundation for developing new approaches to teaching dance. Action research methodology, applied through the evolving iterations of *Latin Dance Party*, concerns analysis and interpretation; however, more importantly, it is about practical implementation. In the case of the research into *Latin Dance Party*, this meant taking the cycles of action research and using them to develop even more efficient vehicles for teaching students about cultural understanding.

### **First research project (team-building)**

The initial research project, *Team-building activities in dance classes and discoveries from reflective essays*, was designed to explore the learning needs of the students participating in the unit *Latin Dance Party* from a psychology

perspective. This unit, based on acquiring Latin American social dance skills, draws students from across the university, resulting in a culturally diverse cohort. The project was aimed at investigating the use of team-building activities as a teaching and learning approach in the dance classroom, to address this diversity and the social nature of the dance styles, and was supported by the researchers' knowledge of Latin American dance and psychology. This project resulted in the implementation of a range of team-building activities. Detailed descriptions of these activities were provided in an initial publication about the first research project (Hanrahan & Pedro, 2017); however, one example is the game Minefield. In this,

objects are spread all over the floor. The students work in pairs, but with the whole class doing the exercise simultaneously. One person in each pair is blindfolded and starts on one side of the room. The non-blindfolded people are on the other side and call out instructions to guide their partner towards them. The blindfolded person cannot touch objects or other people. If an object is touched, the person must start over. The exercise is then done without the use of language, just noise signals. (Hanrahan and Pedro, 2017, p. 58).

This activity was developed in the second research project to involve language; the students giving instructions in Brazilian Portuguese, using words relevant to dance, such as left, right, forward, and backward.

The results of the research “suggest that including team-building activities within a university dance class is useful for helping to promote feelings of closeness, similarity, and bonding as they relate to dance, and improving students' individual interpersonal skills, dance skills, and mental and personal skills” (Hanrahan & Pedro, 2017, p. 65). Some recommendations from this research included that the activities should “be spread throughout the semester” and introduced early so that the students realised the benefit without feeling there was less time to dance (Hanrahan & Pedro, 2017, p. 65). A part of the rationale for using these activities was to alleviate the awkwardness of physical touch when dancing with other students and because “the feeling of belonging to a group is important to achieving the character of the dance style” (Hanrahan & Pedro, 2017, p. 65) *salsa rueda*. Whilst these activities replicate social interaction, it was recommended that the activities should also be based in problem solving situations and “be challenging, creative, and fun” (Hanrahan & Pedro, 2017, p. 65).

## Second research project (cultural dance community of practice)

The findings in the first research project supported the use of team-building activities within the unit; however, they also raised the question of the connectedness between teaching approaches, cultural inclusivity and authentic cultural education. The students were engaged in learning activities that were part of a complex web of lived cultural interactions. The environment in which these activities were enacted was alien to the cultural context and, although creating a sense of community and teaching about Latin American dance, failed to capture the essence of Latin American dance and its importance in the social structure of Latin America. It also failed to acknowledge the individual nature of the countries of Latin America and how dance was embedded within those discrete communities. Authentic cultural dance experiences required diverse teaching and learning approaches, and therefore the following discussion investigates the recommendations of the second research project entitled *Creating a cultural dance community of practice: Building authentic Latin dance experiences through a collaborative pedagogy*. This project explored the research question: “How do we support tertiary students in understanding about culturally significant dances?” Sub-questions included: “What is ‘authentic’ cultural engagement?”, “How do we avoid teaching the ‘single story?’” and “How do we design learning experiences to encourage students to value the authentic?” (Pedro et al., 2016).

## The teaching and learning context

As a part of twenty-first century skill development, students need the ability to connect with a range of cultural contexts that create links for their future career paths (Barrett, Byram, Lázár, Mompoin-Gaillard, & Philippou, 2014). The unit, *Latin Dance Party*, started as an exploration of Latin American dance technique. However, to deepen students’ understandings of the cultural significance and applications of Latin American dance, there was a need to explore a more layered approach to pedagogy that reflected the transcultural communication of this dance technique (Pedro, 2017). By increasing the cultural focus of the unit, the current students have opportunities to not only explore cultural dances, but come to know and better understand the world around them through a range of perspectives. Many of the students undertaking the unit will go on to become dance teachers in school and community settings and, with this in mind, the second research project

explored the pedagogy of the authentic, valuing the specific cultural origins of the dance styles taught in the unit.

The search for cultural authenticity outside the country of origin is complex because it takes into consideration ideas around social, spiritual and geographic context, although in this teaching context the focus is on the social function of dance in Latin America (Alter, 2000, p. 34). The occasions in which dance occurs are as important as the technical performance of the steps within each of the individual dances because they give the movement not only meaning and context, but speak to the nuances of the connections between Latin American dance and its communities. Although often performed in a social setting, Latin American dance is seen very much as a discipline that is valued for its community building elements and also for its deep connection to the historical and spiritual understandings of the Latin American people (Pedro, 2017).

Alter's (2000) research into the adaption of dance teaching methods from country of origin to an American university setting identified a disconnection between maintaining the integrity of the traditional dance whilst adapting it to suit the university cohort. Of the seven dance teachers observed, one of them, the Mexican dance teacher, stated that the students needed to "understand how the dance conveys the geographic context and resulting way of life in that setting" (Alter, 2000, p. 34). This quote highlights the need for an emphasis on the experience of dancing these particular styles, rather than on only the steps and sequences. The deeper knowledge of both the cultural context and the dance form requires a multi-layered approach to pedagogy that includes access to physical resources as well as deep knowledge about the dance and music of individual countries.

Within this unit, the approach was transcultural in that the activities and the pedagogy involved the presence of Australian Latin American communities. The Australian and various Latin American cultures were not seen as separate entities, but as an interwoven and connected expression of what it is to be a global citizen. It was an integrated transcultural approach that drew the students' attention to the presence of Latin American culture within their own geographical location. While interculturalism focuses on contact "between cultures that are assumed to be discrete entities", transculturalism interprets "all cultures to be inherently mixed" (Kraidy, 2005, p. 14).

## Shaping the unit

Taking this complexity into consideration, the methodology for the second project involved a series of action research cycles carried out weekly and supported by reflective critical analysis. This research methodology allowed the researchers to respond almost instantaneously without the methodology dominating the subject area. The natural flow of the learning process was enhanced rather than interrupted by data collection. It also allowed a spontaneous engagement with the Australian Latin American community because the researchers took advantage of events occurring within the broader community outside of the university setting.

When this second research project was conducted, the unit was delivered through two classes per week over 10 weeks to 28 students. All 20 classes were taught by one of the researchers, a dance lecturer at the university with over 20 years' experience as a performer and teacher of Latin American dance, referred to in this paper as the 'university teaching artist'. The other researcher, also a dance lecturer, did not participate in the teaching; however, she observed classes to write field notes. Two anonymous questionnaires, both primarily qualitative, were employed at the beginning (Questionnaire 1) and end (Questionnaire 2) of the unit to identify the impact of a range of pedagogical approaches implemented across the semester. Questionnaire 1 gathered data about which degree the students were undertaking and the students' prior dance experience, ethnicity, knowledge of Central and South American dance and culture, and understanding of what an authentic cultural learning experience entails. Questionnaire 2 re-tested the students' knowledge of Central and South American dances and culture and their understanding of what an authentic cultural learning experience entails. It also allowed them to evaluate the pedagogy in terms of its efficacy in achieving authentic cultural engagement. Field notes (gathered during in-class small group discussions or during observation of the classes) and tertiary lecturer reflections recorded during and after the semester were gathered to enable the researchers to reflect in-, on- and for-action to make changes throughout the delivery of the unit and for its next iteration (Schön 1995; Thompson & Pascal 2012). Initial pedagogical changes included access to live Latin American dance music, a range of cultural experiences (culinary, artefacts, music) and interactive professional Latin American dance demonstrations. These changes were further supported by collaboration with the Latin American community both at the university and in the broader Brisbane area as a way of modelling the creation of communities of practice.

Prior to the beginning of the semester, the researchers worked on developing practical solutions to problems within the unit; for example, trying to translate the texture of a cultural experience into a classroom setting outside the country of origin; however, these approaches evolved during the semester through the action research cycles. The curriculum design was analysed and transformed using embedded Latin American perspectives. This process included privileging the cultural learning in the orientation phase of the semester, and included general knowledge about Latin American geography, language, social and cultural artefacts, and music. *Salsa rueda* from Cuba, *merengue* from Dominica, and *bossa nova* from Brazil were chosen specifically to emphasise the individuality of the dance and culture of these three specific geographical areas within Latin America.

The activities throughout the semester became increasingly more complex, not just from a dance perspective, but also culturally, and shed light on the interaction between dance and the social fabric of Latin America. Some of these complexities included the interrelationship between the dance and music. The inclusion in the classroom of a professional Cuban band playing *salsa* and *merengue*, which is one way in which the Australian Latin American community was involved in the unit, and a university student band playing *bossa nova*, gave students access to layered discussions about rhythmic structures, improvisation and social dance nuances. In a separate class, a guest Brazilian community dance artist discussed Brazilian dance culture with the students and demonstrated numerous Latin American dance styles with the university teaching artist. Another class involved discussion with students from the university's Latin American student guild club, who also demonstrated dance styles. A key inclusion within the student experience was a manufactured Latin dance party supported by live music from the Cuban band, guest Latin American community artists to dance with the students, and an outdoor Brazilian barbeque lunch provided by a catering company specialising in Brazilian cuisine, including *churrasco* (a method of barbequing meat over charcoal) (Pedro et al., 2016). These additions assisted the students in transporting the experience from a university dance studio into the streets of Cuba, Dominica and Brazil. Across the semester, these culturally specific experiences allowed the students to develop a curiosity about the interconnections between dance and the cultural lives of the different countries. These changes to the design of the curriculum were then analysed through critical reflection, with adjustments made during the semester.

## Acting on recommendations from both projects

Reflection on these changes, and those made in the first research project, indicated that further iterations of the unit could be developed to support an even more diverse view of cultural perspectives within *Latin Dance Party*. At the end of the second research project, the students' changing beliefs and values were observed as they reflected on their learning experiences through small group discussion and journaling that resulted in a reflective essay assessment. The recommendations that have developed as a result of student and researcher reflections have culminated in a range of pedagogical changes to the unit, to be implemented in 2017, from July to October.

### *Teacher-student relationships*

For students within the unit to question their values and beliefs within this learning context, they need first to have an established relationship of trust with their teacher and with each other. The findings from the initial team-building research identified that to speed up this process, team-building activities need to be interspersed throughout the semester (Hanrahan & Pedro, 2017), allowing the students to bond early in the learning process. This socialisation process helps to remove awkwardness, and stresses the importance of peer-support within communities of practice. The intentional development of social bonds fits nicely with the social function of dance in Latin America. It further acts to support future careers in teaching through the establishment of interpersonal processes as a way of transmitting cultural learnings.

These findings were further supported throughout the second project that emphasised the importance of replicating a cultural community. The students' interactions with people from the Australian Latin American community, through visiting guest artists and members of the university's Latin American student guild club, modelled the social constructs seen within Latin American society. The team-building activities prepared them for the pace of this immersion within this context. In community settings other than this 'instant' one created for this tertiary unit, this relationship might take many months or years to establish. For example, the network of people represented in this unit was established by the university teaching artist over a period of more than 20 years. In the context of this unit, to take advantage of the knowledge that these guests provide, students need to be open to being quickly immersed in unfamiliar social interactions.

The reflections of the university teaching artist highlighted the importance of observation: students observing the dancing peers, guest artists and the university teaching artist (both individually and with the guest). These various connections mirror the social interactions that would happen in this particular cultural context. These observations, in a social sense, are about people watching each other enjoy the dance; learning the intricacies of the movement through modelling rather than direct transmission of dance teaching technique. This process results in the students having more confidence to take risks within the dance styles to improvise and to individualise the steps.

For these observations to unfold in a naturalistic sense, the teaching artist also needs to have a sense of connection with the students. To facilitate this contact, the team-building activities are as important for the teacher's self-discovery as they are for the students, and can result in more time in sharing a dance experience rather than teaching. The team-building further supports the trust relationship between teacher and student within this manufactured social setting.

### ***Development of contextual knowledge***

The second research project identified that, due to time constraints, students needed far more time outside the classroom to learn about the context of the dances. This point raises the issue of teaching efficiencies in and around the transmission of cultural knowledge. Online resources provide a practical vehicle for giving students access to a range of detailed knowledge in regard to geography and history from particular regions of Latin America. Although this pedagogical practice is efficient, some care needs to be taken that there is a nexus between theory and practice and that the classroom component is not solely focus on the teaching of steps.

With this in mind, the design of the online resources needs to be a combination of readings, articles, film and dance demonstrations as well as discussions between the university teaching artist and guest artists, who will later be a part of the classroom practice. This procedure enables students to establish a connection with the guest artists prior to observing them in the classroom and accelerates the creation of the bond necessary for the guest artist to partner students in dancing. The use of a narrative interview technique in a relaxed setting for the video recordings, where these guest artists can share anecdotal as well as highly specific knowledge about the culture and the technique of the dance, is

essential to maintaining the tone of the learning experience. These details imply that the physical classroom, as well as the online classroom, will be a place that is full of joy, excitement, energy and community support.

The online resource material is an ideal medium to support the notion of Latin America as many individual countries rather than the homogenous stereotype. The 2017 iteration of *Latin Dance Party* will start with students completing an online survey which poses various questions about terminology, some contentious such as ‘Latin American dance’, ‘street Latin dance’, and ‘authentic Latin dance’. It will also contain questions about Cuba, Dominica and Brazil, and the dance styles of *salsa rueda*, *merengue*, and *bossa nova*. Subsequent class discussion about the outcomes of the survey will help students identify gaps in their knowledge and will be a platform for discussion about terminology, the transculturation of Latin dance styles, and the various related issues such as appropriation, authenticity, commodification and preservationism (Shay, 2008).

Although the use of language appropriate to each of the dance styles was used throughout both projects (Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese), brief online language examples modelled in videos featuring the university teaching artist, guest artists (dancers and musicians), and members of the university’s Latin American student guild club will be used in the 2017 iteration of the unit to provide ongoing connections with language beyond the time limitations of the unit. Students will learn descriptive words relating to the stylistic features of the dances, rather than just the names of steps or directions in space, to be used in the physical classroom.

The videoing of short performances from Brisbane-based Latin American dance events for the 2017 unit will develop a broader knowledge of Latin American dance and promote the students’ future connections with this dance community after they have graduated. These video examples, which include Latin American dance in a social, performative, cultural (e.g., festivals) and ballroom dance context, will serve to cultivate a diverse perspective of Latin American dance in multiple contexts outside the university setting. These multiple perspectives enable the students to be more sensitive to the appropriate use of this cultural artefact in numerous cultural environments.

Future iterations of the unit beyond 2017 may also involve activities connecting the Australian students with students in a Latin American university undertaking dance studies. These could be one-on-one or whole-group activities.

Ideally, this would occur near the beginning of the semester, acting as a platform to contextualise the learning to follow as the unit unfolded.

Many of the students undertaking *Latin Dance Party* will go on to become teachers, and therefore the online resources need to make transparent the process of setting up a community of practice. Resources will be developed that deal with logistical issues concerning collaborating with a community, including examples of cultural protocols, thereby modelling strategies the students will use in their own future teaching contexts. These resources will include previous feedback from the Latin American communities that participated in the unit, and highlight the essential nature of community consultation when teaching about cultural dances.

### ***Reflective teaching and learning approaches***

Alter (2000, p. 36) discussed the phenomenon in cultural dance contexts of the dilemma of technique versus cultural context. When the focus is on performance of the dance, the cultural context can take a back seat and result in teachers separating these two approaches. Through reflective practice, both on the part of the university teaching artist and the students, the simultaneous honouring of both aspects of Latin dance can be addressed. The university teaching artist must engage in consistent and planned reflection throughout the unit that investigates the teacher's own learned cultural experience and interpretive paradigms. Transparency in this reflection in the classroom then empowers the students to engage in their own reflective processes, questioning their own cultural learnings and developing a nuanced perspective of dance and its place within cultural settings.

The development of reflective processes across the unit privileges joint construction between the university teaching artist and the students. These processes need to move beyond group discussion and written reflections to embrace a personal student investment in the learning approaches within the unit as it evolves. This method requires agility on the part of the university teaching artist in planning the unit to respond to what is being observed in the classroom through timing of experiences and unfolding of knowledge. The students need room within the teaching structure to reject some of the information, if they want to, through reflection and dialogue, which in turn may also increase their ability to articulate their tacit knowledge. This flexibility in the teaching plan empowers the students through their own curiosity.

Post-assessment reflection further supports the pedagogy of students investing in the learning approaches and emphasises the role of reflection in transcultural learning as a life-long skill. This pedagogy also may result in students deliberately creating future goals that connect with the local Latin American community. Students then have the flexibility to be part of a community of practice beyond the set timeframes of the university timetable. Further investigation into the longevity of this relationship between the students and the community is warranted.

What remains clear from the results from both research projects is the necessity to allow time and space to reflect about interpersonal relationships and their connection with cultural perspectives. In an attempt to create a rich learning experience, there is a temptation to over-fill the unit with too much content in terms of steps and readings. Allowing time for reflection enables students to develop skills to continue their own investigation at the completion of the unit.

## Conclusion

By shifting the emphasis to the cultural and community contexts within the unit, the students' inquiry shifted from purely wanting to investigate the technical aspects of the dance, to in-depth questioning about its role within culture. Due to the diverse nature of the cohort, the unit will be constantly evolving; however, this culturally-based focus will remain the core of the structure of the unit. The relationship between the university teaching artist and the students, supported by culturally orientated team-building activities, will continue to develop trust and confidence and result in a willingness to explore values and beliefs around cultural knowledge. The development of online resources will result in greater time in the classroom to implement reflective teaching and learning approaches and to nurture an ongoing connection with the Latin American dance community, both in Australia and abroad.

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