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Necessity Fuels Creativity

Adapting Long-Distance Collaborative Methods for the Classroom

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Improved technology has made it possible to virtually bridge distance between dance makers, rendering physical location another choreographic device to be manipulated. Long-distance collaboration as an artistic process is not only a fertile new ground for creation and necessary for many practicing dance artists in the field today, but there is increased demand for the development of online courses and tools for student interaction. Low-tech methods and also high-tech, digital technologies as creative tools are useful in distance collaboration processes. For our purposes, we define high-tech tools as anything digital, including cellular phones, web-based applications, and computers. Low-tech refers to everything else, including analog tools, but also other means of communication such as physical mail. These methodologies can serve as a starting point in adapting classes that teach creative process via online formats. Within this article, we examine physical distance as a choreographic tool to be worked with rather than against; we focus on the creative use of distance learning and distance dance-making methods as a means for discovering how technology can be integrated into the choreographic process for performance and education. We conclude by sharing collaborative tools and examples of creative exercises for the studio and classroom.

Mountain Empire Performance Collective (MEPC) is a dance-based performance collective exploring processes and ways of making work while separated by both time and space. Our approach to collaboration originally derived from being too geographically distant to engage in a “typical” creative process. We had no specific technology in mind when we began. Although working with technology is by no means without challenges and limitations, through the process of distance collaboration, we have developed logistical strategies, technical troubleshooting techniques, and creative workarounds to overcome a minefield of potential technological pitfalls. We have also found that obstacles, when they arise, can unlock new choreographic material and reveal creative processes that are unexpected, fresh, and original.

DISTANCE AS A CREATIVE TOOL

Beyond the classroom and studio, dancers and artists are connected through community and a rapidly growing network that is fueled by technology and the ability to communicate across vast distances. Our approach to using technology in dance making has been constructed around a philosophy that artistic goals should be primary and that technology should serve the creative intent rather than be used for technology’s sake. Although exploring uses and applications of technology and software can lead to creative practice, we specifically aim first to organize our creative ideas so that technology becomes a partner in problem-solving instead of an organizing principle. Starting from a place of creativity, rather than beginning with a specific piece of technology in mind, can allow ideas about what technology to use and how to use it to remain open and flexible.

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Fruitful distance collaboration can come from adapting whatever technology is available to fit the artistic goals. This includes finding free or at-hand materials that can accomplish creative desires and adapting technology for alternative purposes. Although using technology in collaboration can be an expensive endeavor, it is useful to view better resolution videos, high-quality sound, two-way videos, and so on as merely options and not requirements. Repurposing technology that is already accessible, such as school computers or personal cell phones, can be an approachable means of using high-tech methods. Text messages, e-mail, and social media apps such as ooVoo, WhatsApp, Twitter, Vine, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook are potential collaborative tools that many students are already using in other contexts. Online video chat applications such as Google Hangouts and Skype offer accessible outlets to collaborate and to create movement material from separate locations. Most cell phones have video and image capture capabilities and can be used to send creative material or movement prompts. Turning these routine communication devices into collaborative tools is an example of appropriating existing technology toward a new purpose. Additionally, low-tech communication such as letter-writing and telegrams are often overlooked resources. One of our original collaborative tools relied on sending handwritten letters via “snail mail” (the U.S. Postal Service). By taking an equal look at all communication options, unique collaboration methodologies can occur.

When working across distance, collaboration can happen synchronously via video, live chat, or phone, or asynchronously via text, e-mail, or letters. The process that mimics face-to-face studio collaboration most closely is creating dance with synchronous video conferencing because it allows for communication through verbal and body language. Collaborating over a small screen on a computer or cell phone brings specific creative hurdles, including increased spatial constraints and the necessity of staying in close proximity to the screen. Framing an entire body is often difficult over video calls as is the ability to see detail that is too far away to be adequately captured on screen. This limits traditional ways of translating full-body choreography from one person to another. Workarounds for small screens and poor resolution include using verbal cues rather than physical demonstration, working in a small kinesphere, or using only a portion of the body. Because of the way we perceive bodies over a screen, mirroring is often easier and more effective than reversing movement. Additional choreographic devices that adapt well to screen-based collaboration include using canon, taking turns adding on movement as an accumulation, and creating movement that is stationary.

In addition to physical adaptations that might be necessary with screen-based collaboration, digital correspondence itself can present its own set of creative hurdles. We have encountered numerous dropped cell phone calls and frozen video calls, both of which can cost valuable time. We have learned to allow for additional time when

working with digital technology and have adopted a method of note-taking on a shared document to allow members to get up to speed when they are disconnected. We have also taken advantage of these dropped or frozen calls for creative use. Incorporating frozen pictures into visual media, recording strange audio noises for use in sound scores, and using video time lags as a prompt to insert pauses into choreographic phrases have all been ways to make use of these technological stumbling blocks.

Collaborating asynchronously can feel more like a solo endeavor than a group exercise. At one time or another all MEPC members have expressed a feeling of isolation, despite being actively engaged in a collaborative process. This is an inevitable side effect of working with distance and should be acknowledged when considering each new project. It is helpful to be strategic about how asynchronous and synchronous methods can be mixed to balance any feelings of detachment. Having a regular synchronous meeting time throughout a process can help bridge this additional element of separation.

EXPANDING INFLUENCES AND STRENGTHENING TIES

Throughout distance dance-making methodologies is an inherent desire and drive to connect with others beyond local community. Creating art with collaborators both near and far connects us as humans and as dancers, strengthening ties and bridging differences. Collaborating with an artist or school in another city can illuminate artistic assumptions of what is right, normal, or abnormal. It can also be a way to challenge typical methods of art-making or teaching approaches by adjusting the amount of control everyone has over the process as well as the end product. Alternate views of the creative process are of great value in the classroom; in using distance collaboration for performance, even further letting go is necessary as no one has ultimate control over the end product.

Working across distance can help to expand aesthetic and social spheres of influence and challenge known approaches to dance making. Distance collaboration methods allow artists and teachers to tap into ideas and trends that are stylistically, technically, philosophically, culturally, or regionally different. Breaking free from one’s obsessive milieu is a constant battle for many artists no matter how large the artistic community is, and in the words of Mark Twain (1869), “broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime” (650). By sending scores through the mail, such as the experiential Telephone Dance Project listed at the end of this article, and collaborating nationally and internationally, we can expand and bolster our global dance community.

This desire to strengthen cross-cultural partnerships and appreciation for other people and dance forms can be aided by distance collaboration. By virtually traveling beyond

one's local community, regional movement trends are rendered more visible, and there is improved access to dance techniques that are unavailable because of location. Collaborations with different communities can help regional issues reach a national audience, and particularly for rural or underfunded arts communities, adopting long-distance collaborations can help fuel connections to larger or more established communities, assisting with access to funding opportunities, resources, and exposure. These communities can be isolated from the milieu and politics of urban art scenes and vice versa; urban areas can be blind to the different contexts within which rural artists are working. Building bridges between communities opens different populations up to new situations and artistic challenges and unknown ways of working. In all of these collaborative approaches, technology can be a vehicle and catalyst.

ADAPTING DISTANCE METHODS FOR EDUCATION

Developing distance methods of dance making can be applied to developing structures for online or blended learning courses. These structures can also be used in the classroom to find new ways of exploring the Elements of Dance within the Creating process of the National Core Arts Standards (NCCAS 2014). Additionally, experimenting creatively with distance methods can help educators to develop a reliable and affordable mixture of the aforementioned high- and low-tech methods of working.

To communicate across distance, dancers can use a shared vocabulary within a particular technique, or they must operate outside of their vernacular, using general terms that can be applied across many art and movement forms. This latter approach aligns with concepts found in the Elements of Dance such as energy and time (Elements of Dance 2011). Energy elements such as weight and tension and time elements such as speed and tempo are popular and useful tools for dance educators to explore through imagery and sound. For teachers using the National Core Arts Standards, sound equipment for recording noises and words that convey one or two Elements of Dance can be used for young dancers in the generating and developing stages of Creating, Anchor Standards 1 and 2 (NCCAS 2014). Higher grades can create their own sound scores experimenting with the Elements of Dance to exchange with collaborators at other schools, such as the creative exercise "Giant in the Sky," found at the end of this article. Exercises like these become an introduction to the creating, performing, and responding processes by identifying and analyzing the Elements of Dance each collaborator uses in creation and performance.

Creating choreographic studies with long-distance collaborators is similar to creating choreographic assignments for students enrolled in fully online classes. In both situations, it is essential to experiment ahead of time to find the clearest way of communicating and the most suitable platforms for instructing. Different file and video-sharing applications

such as Google Drive, DropBox, Box, Vimeo, and YouTube all have different file usage limits and privacy settings that require careful navigation.

Online correspondence tools such as Google Hangouts and Skype are easily accessible formats for conducting online workshops or facilitating guest artists, particularly if a projector or external speakers are available. These workshops can be traditional or unconventional. In one of our workshops, we experimented with multiple distance learning methods by having collaborators present material through multiple formats. One collaborator was physically present with the participants and led a warmup. Students then generated movement material from a series of written directions mailed in by a second collaborator. A third collaborator directed the participants to manipulate this phrase material by sending them text messages with directives such as "insert two pauses" or "retrograde your first three movements." The movement phrase was then further manipulated into a choreographic study, directed by a fourth collaborator who was observing (and being observed) via Skype. In any meeting, establishing a good Internet connection and knowing the full spectrum of available tools is key.

The tools and exercises referenced in this section could be easily adapted into more formal online learning environments, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) or online university courses (full or blended). In some ways, the online environment is more conducive to this way of working because students often have online support and increased access to sophisticated and high-quality tools. Another benefit of distance collaboration in online courses is that it creates a context in which learning new applications and tools is inspired. To that end, using distance collaboration tools provides online learners with transferable skills to use in other collaborations, dance and nondance alike.

CONCLUSION

Creative use of distance methods has been a means for discovering how technology can be integrated into the choreographic process for both performance and educational purposes. Throughout, we strive to keep the artistic and educational goals primary and find technology that suits the purpose. Both high-tech and low-tech methods of collaboration have allowed us to bridge distance and community. Over this ongoing process of developing creative work, we have discovered ways of using distance methods that work for us and help us to approach technology in a curious and open way. We have found that by embracing the inevitable technical mishaps, we are able to view communication glitches as opportunities for creativity rather than sources of irritation. Frustration certainly can and will occur, but by treating technology as another creative tool that is unknown and open to potential, we hope to open the channels of possibility and embrace what is an increasingly necessary and critical element of dance education and dance making today.

EXERCISES

Experiential: Telephone Dance Project

Telephone Dance Project is a long-distance collaborative process using letter writing to create a dance. It is also a good introduction to distance dance making without any high-tech needs.

1. *Number each participant.* Each person will be sending his or her dance letters to the following number: Person 1 gives to Person 2, 2 gives to 3, and so on, and the last number gives to Person 1.
2. *Make a short dance phrase and write it down in a letter.*
 - The letter could be in literal terms that describe the movements, imagery that gives a sense of the action, or drawings that describe a pathway or a shape.
 - Make sure to title your dance (this could be your own name or a descriptive word), and write it at the top of your letter so you can track its progress down the line.
 - Once you are done writing your dance letter, pass it or mail it to the following number in order.
3. *Translate the letter you receive into movement.*
 - Practice this phrase until you no longer need to look at the letter to remember the movements.
 - Write it down into a new letter using your own words or drawings. Don't peek at the original letter! Use your own understanding of the new phrase you made.
 - Make sure to write the original title of the dance at the top of the letter.
 - Once you are done, pass it or mail it to the following number in order.
4. *The process continues until every dancer has received a written version of every original dance phrase.* Each member now has phrases of movement that represent all the dancers in the group. It's up to you to decide what to do with these phrases. This material can then be used to create scores, combining different phrases and seeing how similar or different each phrase becomes when the movement is passed down the line.

Use this sample phrase to start your own Telephone Dance Project:

1. Facing forward, step out with left leg and arms out to sides.
2. Right leg makes semicircle pathway on floor behind left leg to replace left foot.
3. Arms come up above head with your right hand grabbing your left wrist.
4. Step out with left leg.
5. Right leg releases from floor.
6. Dive down with arms and head.
7. Dart to the right to face a new direction.
8. Circle left leg to initiate turn with arms following.

9. Glide left to face a new direction.
10. Scamper.
11. Head is heavy to the right.
12. Bend right knee, lay on floor.
13. Make a pyramid.

Experiential: Giant in the Sky

Giant in the Sky is a simple way to incorporate easily accessible technology into a project or assignment. For one of our projects, we had a collaborator participate by sending vocal directives. She recorded movement directions via the voice memo function on her phone and sent them to the other collaborators via e-mail. This recording became the instructional sound score for one of our projects. The following is a directive for a Giant in the Sky score.

1. *Find a recording device.* Find something that makes e-mailing or texting directions to another person simple; for example, the voice recording function on your phone or computer.
2. *Have someone in mind.* Think of a specific person for whom you would like to record directions. It doesn't matter if that person is the final recipient; just keep him or her in mind when making your instructions. Use what you know about this person's personality and movement style to inspire your directions.
3. *Write and then record your directions.* You are the voice of the person in charge. Keep in mind that your voice controls the listener with every direction, word, and sound. Include directions that are spoken or implied with the dynamics of your voice. Some ideas to address are the following:
 - *Body:* Moving whole body or individual body parts.
 - *Time:* Are they accelerating, decelerating, or staying the same pace?
 - *Energy:* Is it getting heavier or lighter? Does it have a sharp attack or flow with ease?
 - *Space:* Can you make them focus in on something small or take in a large area? Can you get them to move to a new place in the room? Might you direct them to another person and what interaction might they have?
 - *Meaning:* Do the directions seem to address a feeling or lead the mover through a journey of some kind, or is it purely an investigation?
 - *Phrasing:* Go back and listen to your directions. Listen to how the sound of your voice rises and falls. Then listen to the number of directions you're giving and where they fall in relationship to each other. Get a picture of how the whole thing works together. Ask yourself what can be adjusted or tweaked to give the dancer or the audience a particular experience through the phrasing of your directions.

4. *Send your Giant in the Sky* to a dancer and have them send their own back.
5. *Decide what to do*. Will this be performed with the recording or without? Can it be expanded on to create a developed solo, a duet, or a group piece? How can the directions be sourced for a score or further Giant in the Sky explorations?
6. *Discuss or reflect*.
 - How does recording Giant in the Sky change the way you describe movement?
 - How does dancing Giant in the Sky change the way you move or think while moving?
 - How does the *Giant in the Sky* model change the way you might make a dance?
 - How does using your own voice while creating your own Giant in the Sky change the way you think about giving or listening to speeches?

- What does following directions in Giant in the Sky remind you of in your own life or the world around you?

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