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Online Programming for Dancers and Dance Educators: A Response to COVID-19 and the Racial Justice Movement

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Abstract

Upon the convergence of the twin epidemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice in 2020, the Delaware Dance Education Organization (DDEO) responded by creating and presenting interactive professional development webinars that ranged from sharing how dance history is a microcosm of the world to the impact culture has on personal behaviors. Through the lens of public scholarship, the virtual programming format allowed DDEO to reach dance populations in Delaware and beyond. Groundswell, a series of four webinars presented a consideration of the impact racism has in the dance world. Solos@Home invited participants to create, share, and virtually perform dance works based on material presented in Groundswell. Solos@Home II continued in this modality highlighting the theme of environmental justice. The value of activism was a key enduring understanding for these projects. DDEO continues to support and advance dance education while listening and responding to the immediate needs of the community.

Introduction

As a state affiliate of the United States National Dance Education Organization (NDEO), Delaware Dance Education Organization's (DDEO) mission is to support and advance dance education centered in the arts. This organization was established in 2018, and initially, DDEO struggled to fulfill this mission as the organization balanced the need for programming, membership, and finances.

Upon the convergence of the twin epidemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice in the spring and summer of 2020, DDEO, like many organizations, suddenly had to focus on creating programming that would meet the needs of the dance community in new ways. Dance educators were struggling to survive and respond. While supporting them, DDEO began to find its feet and the organization began to strengthen and grow.

DDEO's immediate response to COVID-19 was to help dance teachers and studio heads shift to working in the virtual world by presenting a series of webinars: Cyber Support For Delaware's Dance Educators. The sessions were called Financial Considerations, Online

Teaching, Online Performances, and Online NDEO Resources.

Then the death of an African American from Minnesota, George Floyd, at the hands of a white police officer in June of 2020, brought to the forefront a consideration of the specific ways in which racism had an impact on our lives and society. Dance, as taught in schools and studios, has long considered western dance forms (ballet, modern dance) as the default. Tap, jazz, and hip hop, which evolved from the rhythms and improvisational creations of enslaved African Americans, are often only included in dance education as extras. This approach has implications for what is taught, who is teaching, and classroom norms. For instance, classical ballet assumes the primacy of European body types and often requires dancewear that highlights the white European body type and complexion.

In response to these issues, DDEO created and presented professional development webinars that ranged from informational to interactive and educational. The virtual format of the programming allowed DDEO to reach dance students and teachers from Delaware to California. The issues provided an opportunity to create programming based on the tenets of community engagement or public scholarship (Boyer, 1996; Overby, 2016). DDEO provided a scholarly framework for the creation, implementation, and assessment of the online programming that occurred during 2021–2022.

Our working definition of public scholarship in the arts and humanities comprises research, scholarship, or creative activity that connects directly to the work of specific public groups in specific contexts; arises from a faculty member’s field of knowledge; involves a cohesive series of activities contributing to the public welfare and resulting in “public good” products; is jointly planned and carried out by coequal partners; and integrates discovery, learning, and public engagement (Cantor & Lavine, 2006, paragraph 14).

The officers of the DDEO include four university faculty members, two public school teachers, and two studio owners. This collaboration of university and community partners added a significant depth to the project design and implementation.

The online project included components of scholarly community engagement assessment (Glassick et al., 1997):

1. Clear Academic and Community Change Goals

The project steeped in the knowledge of community engagement practices included mutual benefits and reciprocity, from the beginning to the conclusion of the project. Both the community and the field of dance education benefitted from this collaboration.

2. Adequate Preparation in Content Area and Grounding in the Community

The dance educators involved in this project included educators with 20–40 plus years of dance teaching, research, and service experience. The community educators were very knowledgeable about the needs and concerns of dancers and dance educators.

3. Appropriate Methods: Rigor and Community Engagement

Over the course of the online programming, activities were designed to address specific community needs and create a space for students and teachers to gain knowledge, skills, and the opportunity to apply their knowledge in activities and choreography.

4. Significant Results: Impact on the Field and the Community

The community engagement project was one of several worldwide examples by dance educators that supported the need to pivot to online programming. This need was met by DDEO and had a positive impact on the teachers and students of Delaware. Through the analysis of qualitative data and quantitative scores, the organization was able to discern the impact of the series of projects.

5. Effective Presentation/Dissemination to Academic and Community Audiences

To date, the information in this paper has been shared at the NDEO annual conference, and through conversations with international dance educators who are members of Dance and the Child International. Community engaged projects must be disseminated in a variety of formats, not only research journals.

The series of webinars began with *Groundswell: Dance as a Voice for Social Change*. These four webinars presented a consideration of how racism has manifested in the dance world and how it affects dancers.

Following these webinars was an opportunity for participants to choreograph, with *Solos@Home*. This project was a response to both the isolation of dancers during COVID-19 and to ongoing issues of racial injustice in the dance community in particular and in the wider world in general. Dancers were invited to respond to the material first presented in *Groundswell* webinars.

Solos@Home II continued the work of delving into themes of racial injustice that began with *Groundswell* and *Solos@Home*. The focus this time was on matters particular to the field of environmental justice. These projects were designed to benefit both the dance community at large and DDEO, the organization presenting them. The dance community was given a chance

to process the complicated world into which we had been thrust and the leaders of DDEO learned a lot about producing virtual programming for community members.

This paper focuses on a response to the needs of the community through the lens of community engagement. The design, implementation, assessment, and dissemination of three of the webinars created for the Delaware dance community are described.

Groundswell: Using Dance As a Voice for Social Change

The series of three webinars, Groundswell: Using Dance as a Voice for Social Change, was a response to the divisive political climate engendered by racial justice issues. The DDEO board felt compelled to latch onto and dive deep into the conversations with the focus on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

The organization felt a strong obligation to their constituents to create a virtual seminar series that addressed the “isms” pervasive in our society. Fueled by BLM and Ibram X. Kendi’s book *How to be an Antiracist* (2019), the presenters set forth to provide tools for teachers and students to become more educated about the contributions of all people, especially people of color, in the many genres of dance expression. Dance educators have a responsibility to acknowledge and rectify prejudicial behaviors and a responsibility to demonstrate for students how dance can both communicate pain and help them heal.

The illumination of racial inequities revealed through BLM touched all aspects of our lives. Throughout the sessions, participants from Delaware, Pennsylvania, and Maryland were provided resources and strategies that enabled them to become steeped in antiracist dance teaching practices.

The first workshop, presented by Dr. Lynnette Overby, professor of dance and director of a university community engagement initiative at the University of Delaware, set the stage for the next three. Dr. Overby introduced the format and goals for each webinar and outlined the importance of expanding one’s knowledge and understanding of pathways to a more inclusive world, thus the title of the series: Groundswell: Using Dance as a Voice for Social Change. Each webinar was open to NDEO members across the US. The presentation was followed by a practical learning experience and a discussion about how to implement these practices in the future. The webinars reached members of NDEO as well as local dance studio owners and local educators on Thursday evenings during August 2020. On any given night, twenty to thirty-five people attended from Delaware, Virginia, Florida, Arizona, Maryland, New Hampshire, Utah, California, New York, Illinois, and Washington, DC.

The second presentation in the Groundswell series was A Pathway to Understanding and

Healing: Exclusivity and Racism in Dance. The presenters for this workshop were Joan Warburton-Phibbs and Teresa Emmons. Joan Warburton-Phibbs is a former public school dance teacher and now a university faculty member, and Teresa Emmons is the owner of a successful private dance academy. The goal was to connect human experiences by engaging in what binds people as opposed to what separates individuals. Lessons from Sterling K. Brown and Ibram X. Kendi provided guidance on the value of shared experiences and storytelling, translating events and feelings surrounding the events into thematic movement studies. For instance, in an episode of *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, Brown teaches that:

It's a centralized way for Black folks to see other people's stories and for allies who are interested to see that the experiences that their friends have told them about are not a one-off...that these isolated incidents are happening over and over again all over the country...and then there's a development of empathy and hopefully a wave of support that we can ride right now to make some real change to systemic racism in this country. (Amira et al., 2020, 2:58)

Kendi (2019) has said:

“Racist” and “antiracist” are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos. No one becomes a racist or antiracist. We can only strive to be one or the other. (p. 23)

Starting with these quotes, the DDEO presenters offered an experiential workshop designed to illuminate the value of sharing stories to become more empathetic human beings. Finding common ground with one another within all “isms” was the connecting theme. In his book, Kendi (2019) speaks to the disparities in culture. He explains that the more he felt connected to other humans, the more equal he felt and more able to listen with empathy to their stories.

Creating dances is a powerful way to discover our own stories and respond to stories of others. This webinar offered models for working with dancers to both elicit their narratives and to help them create their own dances. During the webinar, the virtual participants and live dancers participated in improvisations using emotive words such as fear, isolation, abandonment, hurt, angry, lost, etc., which allowed each dancer to express and engage in a partnership with another's personal journey. Participants had the opportunity to write personal stories of when they experienced racism, sexism, ageism, etc. Each story was then transposed into a short dance study using emotions as the tie that binds; these brought a sense of authenticity to the dances. Each live participant agreed to have their dances videotaped and shared with the virtual community. This provided a structure and a template for the first

Solos@Home project. The webinar concluded with a discussion of how to examine our practices and what changes we can make to ensure that our work is inclusive and welcoming to all. Participants said they felt “vulnerable yet free” with their movement expressions.

The focus of the third webinar, Taking it to the Next Level, was jazz dance, an American form with African roots. This webinar was presented by Erika Brown, A.T. Moffett, and Kim Schroeder. Erika Brown is a secondary public school dance educator, and A.T. Moffett and Kim Schroeder are university dance faculty members. The content was largely based on and inspired by the book *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches* by Linda Guarino and Wendy Oliver (2014). Their intent was to inspire current teachers to reevaluate areas of their instruction that could benefit from the purposeful inclusion of the current and historical contributions of West African dance to America’s jazz legacy. As they created the content, they maintained an ultimate focus on providing attendees with practical information they could take from the webinar to make meaningful adjustments to their pedagogical practices that would give greater recognition to the role of the African/indigenous roots of jazz dance.

The presenters believed that it was important to provide solid and compelling evidence without overwhelming the attendees with too much information. Understanding that the audience may not have been familiar with the African/indigenous roots of jazz dance, the presenters made providing video evidence a priority. The focus was on creating at least the beginnings of a working knowledge of the social and kinesthetic elements of West African dance. And though the ongoing struggle of the African American community in the United States is well documented (Guarino & Oliver, 2014; Kendi, 2019) the presenters felt strongly that at least an overview by either decade, event, or time period was also warranted and important.

The final goal of the webinar was extremely practical in nature. Application and integration was an integral part of the programming. The presenters desired that the participants have the ability to adjust some element of their next dance class in a way that credited the West African and/or African American culture for its contribution to the artform. Ultimately, the presenters hoped that any change made by teachers in that direction would be the first of many and would transform the way jazz and all of its branches are delivered to dance students in the future. With that goal in mind, movement activities were integrated throughout the presentation. The class activities and exercises were easy to implement, appealing, and fun.

The final workshop, Ballroom Dance: A Lens for Discovering and Honoring our African Roots, focused on social and ballroom dance and the contributions of African nations to this genre. Presenters included Ken Richards and Gabby Williams. As internationally acclaimed ballroom dance educators, Richards and Williams took a deep look at the development of

dances that linked to circumstances of African enslavement. The dances discussed and taught all had roots in a particular time, place, and circumstance. For example, in the United States, when drums were banished, enslaved people began dancing to the fiddle, banjo, and tambourine (Emery, 1989). In other parts of the world where drums were not prohibited, dances such as the samba and rumba are directly linked to African heritage. By looking at these histories of ballroom dances, this final workshop examined three ideas: dancing preserves our history, dancing honors our ancestors and contributes to the work of crushing racial stereotypes, and dancing helps us claim our heritage while embracing other cultures.

Solos@Home

In the fall of 2020, Solos@Home became the next step in DDEO's effort to recognize and support the work and sacrifice of fellow Americans fighting against social injustices and dismantling systemic, racist institutions at work in the United States. The Groundswell series served as a springboard for this virtual solo choreography showcase for dancers of all ages to create and submit self-choreographed dance solos inspired by the fight for social justice in the United States. Participants were asked to use the recordings of the summer webinar series, Groundswell: Dance as a Voice for Social Change, as their inspiration and to write a brief description of what social issue they were addressing in their choreography. All submissions were screened at a showcase to which friends and family were invited.

The participants included 19 high school and middle school students. Several of their instructors reported that the students held lively discussions about which social issues could be captured effectively through movement before exploring how their feelings about a social issue might inform the movements in their dance. The message had to be expressed clearly using choreographic principles and design. Some found the experience enlightening while others found it painful and cathartic. According to comments collected from the students at the end of the process, they grappled with controversial and possibly divisive themes that were close to home. They were challenged by the need to rethink dance norms that they have learned and accepted all their lives. Their creativity was tested as they had to figure out how to perform in their living rooms, garages, and other non-traditional spaces. As they crafted a response to the issues, they discovered more of themselves and experienced dance as a powerful tool for self-expression. They were supported in this journey by their parents, teachers, and studio owners.

Erika Brown, who teaches at a public high school in Wilmington, Delaware, reported:

I had one student take advantage of the opportunity to choreograph and perform. This participant was new to dance and this experience opened a whole new world for him. He had never taken a dance class before and his exposure to dance was limited to

distance learning on Zoom. Extremely thoughtful and creative, he dove feet first into the experience.

His commitment to this experience led him to pushing through to the end in spite of encountering a last minute hurdle. He had found the “perfect” song but its having lyrics was against the rules. He almost dropped out. Thankfully, he reached out and we found a solution. He was extremely surprised and pleased when he was acknowledged as an outstanding “new to dance” student. It must not be forgotten, all students were experiencing high levels of stress and disillusionment being unable to gather in school buildings with peers for school. For my student, this experience built his confidence and enthusiasm greatly. He reported excitedly looking forward to dance for his senior year. (personal communication, November 20, 2020)

In preparation for the Solos@Home dance showcase, students were provided with a rubric that listed criteria for the creation and assessment of their dances. The rubric provided guidance in the structure and requirements of their work. The rubric, used to guide the creation of choreography by novice choreographers, was adapted from a generalized choreography rubric developed by NDEO with seven categories (spatial elements of dance, choreographic structure and design, theme, technique, musicality, dynamics/effort, overall performance). Most important was the focus on the specific theme and their commitment to interpretations of the theme.

A “newcomer to dance award” was also given providing a semester of free classes graciously given by a local dance studio. As reported above, the student who received that award has continued his study in dance! The most impactful piece was titled “Better not Bitter,” and the dancer used her story from the Groundswell webinar #2: Dance As a Voice for Social Change to create this moving piece. All the PowerPoints for this series can be viewed on the resource tab of our website (www.ddeo.org).

The viewers recognized the dancers’ commitment to the thematic material and “loved the theme and concept behind the solos,” as well as the technique, musicality, movement articulation, quality and control, and use of space and dynamics among many of the solo performers (personal communication, April 30, 2021).

Overall, the first virtual dance showcase was successful. The organization was happy with the number of participants, the variety in dance styles, the solo performances, and overall enthusiasm by our participants, their families, and the virtual audience of approximately 70 households.

Immediately following Solos@Home, conversations began about what theme to offer for Solos@Home II. In assessing the contributions to the first Solos@Home, the presenters noted that the students could benefit from help with costuming, lighting, and filming considerations for works performed at home. Workshops on these skills were developed and shared in the Solos@Home II showcase.

Solos@Home II

Grateful for and inspired by the success of Solos@Home, DDEO developed Solos@Home II: Moving Environmental Justice. This continued to reinforce DDEO's mission of supporting and advancing dance education centered in the arts while connecting with important community issues. Rather than asking the participants to extract content from a webinar series as before, the dancers studied with an expert in the selected topic of environmental justice and received mentoring in the previously demonstrated weak areas of lighting design and costume design.

While Solos@Home was supported by donations from individuals, especially board members, Solos@Home II was supported by a generous grant from the [University of Delaware's Partnership for Arts & Culture](#).

The goals of Solos@Home II were to:

1. create an opportunity for dancers to explore important social issues through performance.
2. enhance dancers' understanding of arts as a vehicle for social awareness and change.
3. bring this awareness into the creative process by partnering with environmental justice scholars, advocates, and community partners.
4. stimulate awareness of the importance of environmental justice through performance.
5. engage both the audience and participants in taking action.

The virtual workshops were offered by Dr. Jame McCray, environmental justice; Jo Fulmer, costume design; and Mitch Levine, lighting design. During the two workshops on environmental justice, dancers were asked to respond to various aspects in the field: What is environmental injustice? What are the causes? What are the consequences? What is threatened? What is lost? How do we respond? What solutions are available? They were also guided in choreographic exercises that gave them the opportunity to create movement that originated from how they felt about these important ideas, concepts, and questions within the selected theme.

In the costume design workshop, dancers were taught how to use costumes they may already have access to and were offered a variety of tips and considerations for creating costumes out of materials they could find at home. They were encouraged, for these dances about environmental justice, to repurpose everyday materials that they might have thought of as trash.

In the lighting design workshop, dancers were given basic lighting considerations for at-home filming and were taught with the inclusion of many exciting examples of theatrical lighting as well as a few video examples of work produced and shared during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mitch Levine conveyed to the dancers the importance of determining which parts of the dance carried major thematic force allowing them to choose which movements to highlight so that the lighting design would come from the heart of the dance itself. In consideration of these offerings for Solos @Home II, we added costume design and lighting to the scoring rubric we had used for Solos @Home.

After the workshops, dancers interpreted specific issues of environmental justice through their choreography and dancing and submitted their videos and written statements to be reviewed. They created dances that portrayed a full range of the issues they had learned about in their environmental justice workshop. They may have felt a personal connection to an issue or they may have been moved by their new learning. Their choreography focused on mass production sweatshops, community destruction, forest fires, access to clean water, toxic air pollution, and pollution in our lakes, rivers, and oceans.

As in Solos@Home, students found the theme challenging. Several expressed their appreciation for the workshops, which they claimed gave them a strategy for approaching their projects. Students thought out presentations and selected costumes, accessories, and props that would clearly communicate the messages in their dances. Several dancers indicated that they found a new way to understand the issues they danced about.

One of the dancers offered a piece called Burden and wrote a powerful statement about how race can determine who is most affected by manmade forces creating poor air quality. She wrote:

People of Color are 1.5 times more likely to live in an area with poor air quality. I am a Person of Color. Where I live should not be an environmental burden. My financial status should not be an environmental burden. My race should not be an environmental burden. (personal communication, April 15, 2021)

DDEO considers Solos@Home II to have been a success as seen in these responses to the

survey showcase audience members filled out:

“Dance performance is a great way to engage and provide awareness.”

“I have always believed dance is a vehicle of expression and therefore informative.”

“Our young people are passionate about saving the environment.”

“I will be more aware of my actions and how they affect the environment.”

The audience was open to learning from dance and dancers and was moved by the students’ passion to make changes in their own lives.

Conclusion

Although 2020–2021 was a year like no other, DDEO took advantage of the opportunity to create programming and opportunities for dancers and dance educators in a virtual format. As a series of public scholarship projects, the programming proved to be mutually beneficial to our local dance community and to our discipline of dance. By aligning the activities with the tenets of public scholarship, the programming proved to be beneficial to the students, the dance teachers and to the field of dance education. The leaders of DDEO learned a great deal about the power and possibilities of virtual presentations. The dance community saw specific ways to respond to the pandemic and racial injustice through our webinars, which emphasized that dance can happen virtually and in isolation and supported the use of dance to engage meaningfully with important ideas.

With the completion of the series of webinars that provided a focus for teachers via the Groundswell series and a focus for students with the two themed choreography projects—Solos@Home on Racial and Social Justice and Solos@Home II on Environmental Justice—DDEO was able to identify a need in our dance community. Teachers of dance were given specific information and suggestions for creating an anti-racist dance curriculum. Dancers were then provided an opportunity to use dance to communicate strong personal statements on themes that are in the forefront of our community’s concerns. In creating these dances with the numerous tools provided by DDEO, these young people (ages 12–18) developed their creative voices to be able to propel social, cultural, and political changes.

Recognizing the need for virtual performance opportunities, DDEO has chosen to include Solos@Home as a part of the annual programming. Social justice themes and educational opportunities will remain at the forefront of the Solos@Home series. As an organization with a goal to support and advance dance education centered in the arts, the organization learned the importance of being community focused—to listen and be responsive to the needs of the

community. In the future, DDEO will continue to provide programming both virtually and in person and maintain a focus on national and international concerns. Finally, dance educators will continue to be invited to share their needs and the organization will be prepared to respond.

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Lynnette Young Overby, a graduate of Hampton University (BS), George Washington University (MA), and The University of Maryland, College Park, (Ph.D.) is the University of

Delaware (UD) Director of The Community Engagement Initiative and Founding Director of the Partnership for Arts & Culture. She also directs the UD Dance Minor and is the Artistic Director of the *Sharing our Legacy Dance Theatre*. Her publications include *The Journal of Dance Education*, *The Journal of Mental Imagery* and co-editor of nine volumes of *Dance: Current Selected Research*. Leadership roles in Dance Education have included service as President of the National Dance Association, President of the Michigan Dance Council, and President of the Delaware Dance Education Organization. Overby received the 2018 Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Dance Education Organization, and in 2020, she served on the Biden/Harris Agency Review Team in Arts and Humanities. Recently, she was inducted into the Academy of Community Engagement Scholarship, and in 2021, she was appointed to serve on the National Council on the Humanities.

Erika Gould Brown, a board member at large for DDEO, is a native Delawarean and graduate of the University of Delaware. She has spent the last nineteen years of her twenty-seven year career in education teaching dance at a local high school.

Teresa Emmons is a teacher, choreographer, and dance educator. A graduate of the Juilliard School, she danced with The State of Alabama Ballet, among others, and taught at Philadanco and Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet (CPYB). She designed the new Academy of the Arts Program at Dover High School in Delaware and directs the Ballet Theatre of Dover.

Kimberly Schroeder is an Assistant Professor of Dance in the Theatre Department of the University of Delaware in their Dance Minor program, where she has been teaching since 2009. At UD, Kimberly regularly teaches technique classes in all styles & levels of ability as well as Tap Dance, Musical Theatre Styles, & Dance in Film. She guest teaches, choreographs, and performs in a variety of venues and has worked in regional and national theatres, including national tours with Missoula Children's Theatre and international performances in Jamaica, Ireland, and Canada. Kimberly is co-founder of the Delaware Dance Education Organization (DDEO) and serves as their Vice President. She is artistic director of modern dance company, Ignite: A Company of Dancing Artists. Kimberly has a Bachelor of Arts in Dance & Vocal Music Performance (2003) from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and an MFA in Dance from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2012).

Joan Warburton-Phibbs is a dance, health, and wellness educator. She holds Master of Science and Fine Arts from Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts and a Bachelor of Science in physical education from Springfield College, Springfield, Massachusetts. She is the co-founder of Chrysalis Center for Creativity in the Performing Arts in Washington, DC (now in Delaware), former performing arts department head at the Madeira School in McLean, Virginia, and Physical Education and Dance director at Georgetown Day School in

Washington, DC. Joan was the Delaware Choreography Fellow of the year for 2018 and is a current DDEO board member and NDEO mentor. Joan works as an adjunct professor at Cabrini University teaching Dance Across the World, Stress Management, and Dance Technique. Joan has choreographed over 250 works, taught all levels of dance and composition in independent private schools (K–higher education) in Washington, DC, Virginia, London, and Amsterdam.

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