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Bridging the Gap with Voice and Movement

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Bridging the Gap with Voice and Movement

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Introduction

Dance at SUNY Buffalo State College delivers a liberal arts education and embraces a civic and community engagement philosophy in all aspects of the program. In addition to rigorous studio training that enhances the physical experience of the art form, the diverse curriculum is designed to deepen students' understanding of the cultural, historical, and aesthetic value of dance, while addressing local and global societal needs through numerous service-learning, artistic, and outreach projects. The COVID-19 pandemic is tremendously affecting artists, yet it is the arts that brings joy to people's lives during unsettling times. Now more than ever we need to educate the broader public on the impact of dance on our lives.

Program Description Prior to COVID-19

The civic and community-engaged interdisciplinary dance program fulfills our dance students' distinct aspirations while enlightening the public on the important role of dance in our world. We continue to explore ways to incorporate high impact practices (HIPS) and applied learning pedagogy into course design and teaching practice to strengthen

student learning. Contingent on the course, typical assignments include practicals, research papers, oral presentations, choreography, and lesson plan development. We intentionally extend the coursework beyond the classroom. Infusing concepts such as inclusion, mastery, and generosity into the teaching and learning process inspires students to want to share their hard work not only with their classmates but also with off-campus groups through community-engagement and service-learning projects.

For the Arts and Letters/Dance Interdisciplinary major, the culmination of a student's learning and vision of future endeavors is reflected in the capstone project; each project is as individual as the student and many include a community-engagement component. Whether it is a research study, resource guidebook, choreography, or other applied project, students are guided to produce a high-quality thesis that is presented in an open forum. Through community-engaged experiences, students become active citizens who reflect on the connection of dance to activism, education, culture, and aspects of daily life. Through the advocacy lens, there is an opportuni-

ty to educate others on the multiple benefits of experiencing dance. By fall 2019, community-engaged practices were incorporated into all course offerings from lecture to studio classes, and from first-year initiatives to senior seminars.

Furthermore, dance performance also provides a unique opportunity for engaging an audience with meaningful social commentary. Choreography is a powerful civic tool when the dancers embody critical global issues and move to convey justice. Our annual spring dance concerts focus on themes that directly connect to the larger community by promoting multiple perspectives, social change, and active citizenship. In addition, students are involved as collaborators in the creative process, deepening their understanding of dance as civic engagement and community building. Faculty, students, alumni, and guest artists have presented a wide range of choreography, providing audiences with engaging and time relevant concepts that spark change.

Changes Made Due to COVID-19

In the middle of the spring 2020 semester, we were forced to quickly re-think the delivery of course content and assessments. Like most educators, we considered how to convert our current teaching methods to a virtual setting, engaging students remotely. To continue the personal interaction with dance students, we utilized discussion forums, video conferencing, and filmed or live-streamed dance technique classes for teaching. Recently, we have been de-

liberately connecting assignments and some assessments to dance advocacy by affording the opportunity for the students to do a public presentation of their work. When physical gatherings were no longer permitted, we needed to explore other avenues of outreach. Therefore, to reach the public, student research essays on the impact of dance on a variety of populations were converted to personal letters and sent to officials such as the NYS Education and/or Health Commissioners, K-12 Superintendents and/or School Boards, etc., for the purpose of influencing decision-making. Oral presentations were abridged to create social media campaigns, broadening the awareness of the impact of dance on humanity.

We needed to think even more creatively when converting two major community-engaged projects. Program-wide service-learning experiences required that students in six different dance courses continue collaborating through email and video conferencing to create dance activities that met the project requests of our six community partners. The design has always considered both the population being served, which ranges from refugee children to adults with special needs, and the content and concepts of each course. Traditionally, the activities are conducted onsite, bringing specialized dance education to these diverse populations. Given the current situation, it was impossible for the close to seventy students to present these activities in person. With guidance and support from the College's Civic and Community Engagement Office, the

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goal changed to assembling the students' lessons to create guidebooks that introduced some background information on the benefits of dance and offered a series of lessons/activities specific to each community partner's population. The guidebooks were distributed to community partners so they can implement them in the future. Our students were excited to share their creations and look forward to continuing with our community partners in the future.

This year's annual spring dance concert, "The World Grooves: Dance Traditions and Explorations" asked our alumni choreographers to embody traditions--their beliefs, ideals, and practices—and accordingly invite the audience to examine their values and standards and to explore new ways for engagement and exchange. For prior concerts, our student-run Dance Association offered public workshops that introduced participants to aspects of the choreography, which subsequently made for a richer audience experience. We were not able to present "The World Grooves"; however, students continued reviewing rehearsal videos and choreographers' notes to then reflect on performance skills and keep the works in our repertoire to perform at a later date. They also designed dance activities to prepare a future audience. COVID-19 may have changed the process but it didn't stop our students' passion for advancing dance education and engaging our community.

Challenges Faced or Problem-solving Techniques Employed

With a short transition period, dance faculty agreed that what was most important was delivering the Student

Learning Outcomes for each course while continuing to address our students' emotional well-being and inadequate equipment for proper remote learning. We felt we were constantly searching for ways to engage the students who reported lack of motivation and how to adjust the delivery for students who struggled with connecting remotely or were working as essential employees. Dance is a kinesthetic art form; the body is the instrument. Evaluation of physical skill development is the primary assessment in a studio course. We attempted to view and review the dancers performing their warm-up exercises and choreographed combinations to analyze and offer suggestions.

This was challenging for two reasons – the camera angle, focus, and/or distance prevented quality viewing and, in some cases, the students did not want the camera to open their homes to others. It became more important than ever to discover a way to inspire them and we decided that we needed their input to make that happen. With the students, we brainstormed ways to self-assess and concentrate on honing their craft and learning new skills. Remaining true to our engagement mission, we discussed ways to utilize the current situation and explored concepts like restrictive environments, solo work, and empathy for and appreciation of others' circumstances. Discussion forums provided opportunity for conversation on pertinent topics and directed reflection assignments inspired the students to dig deeper to understand the relevance of what they were learning to what they were subsequently producing. In a final reflection, one student commented, "[e]ven though this didn't go as planned, I

learned how to organize a team and how to collaborate with people as their leader and partner.” Students realized that this is what we do as artists: problem solve, collaborate, express, and transform. Our weekly synchronous sessions were recorded so that classmates who couldn’t join for any reason would still be able to review the material and see and hear their peers coming together to learn and laugh. It was something to look forward to each week. Class became a catharsis.

Looking Ahead

Student voice has always been an important driver of the direction of the dance program, and we were reminded that being face-to-face, hybrid, or remote does not change this commitment. In final reflections, two students shared, “[b]eing flexible and ready to alter plans is essential, essential, essential, especially when a pandemic hits,” and “I will never forget this experience, thank you for putting so much trust into my hands.” If remote learning is the directive, then in August we will be surveying our students to better understand technology and space equity, meeting to review and reimagine course content, and collaborating with our community partners to design indirect service-learning experiences. Should we still not be able to come together to perform, students in dance composition will be asked to select a civically engaged theme. Throughout the semester, they will document their research, creative process, and movement experiences to create a solo work. The dance composition students’ final presentation, *Solo Flights*, will be a film shown on December 10th, Human Rights Day.

Conclusion

Although both dance as a discipline and civic and community engagement as a pedagogy are expressed best and have the most impact in a face-to-face experience, there was much to be explored and learned through this time of isolation. As educators, we need to remain open and navigate the situations, take advantage of teachable moments, and model what we expect from our students. ■