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Changing the Game: College Dance Training for Well-Being and Resilience Amidst the COVID-19 Crisis

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Assessment of Need

In January 2020 a large-scale pandemic, caused by the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 (i.e., COVID-19), swept through global communities, crippling national economies, taxing health systems worldwide, and massively transforming the way education was delivered (Kickbusch I., et al., 2020). Across the United States, starting in February/March 2020, there was an expanding sense of fear, anxiety and depression as the virus spread (Zhai, Y., & Du, X., 2020). As the severity of the pandemic was realized, community lockdowns began and social distancing measures were implemented in mid-March 2020. In Florida, in particular, cases of COVID-19 continued to climb into June and July 2020: according to the CDC, Florida maintained some of the highest case counts in the country (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020), reinforcing the continued importance of physical distancing and closure of many social settings. The limited social connectedness during this time underscored the need to maintain class and community connectivity. One professor at the University of South Florida’s (USF) College of Public Health, a prominent research university in Florida, who had focused his life outside of school on dance training for three and a half years, conceived of a dance training intervention to help his students and others during this continuing pandemic.

Overview of the Intervention

With the growing uncertainty associated with indefinite lockdowns, anxiety, fear, and depression were setting in for the college students and faculty alike. One professor decided to use an online conference platform to bolster mental health and well-being for students and community members by hosting a virtual dance class every week. This was in response to interest from students in the college and with the motivation of other experienced dance instructors who were also trying to determine the best virtual tools to continue their classes.
Given the circumstances surrounding the lockdown and the novel nature of this intervention, particularly the professor’s novice as a dance teacher, select community members were invited based on personal connection with the professor.

Dance training was an ideal focus of the intervention as it is a movement therapy with numerous physical and mental health benefits including: management of anxiety and depression, improvement of self-esteem and betterment of motor skills (Ward, 2008; Murcia-Quiroga, et. al., 2010). Part of the novelty of this effort lay in the fact that the professor was new to dance instruction, despite being a long-time dance student. The rapid transition to dance teacher required focusing on the language of dance, determining what virtual platforms were most efficient and what lessons were compatible with virtual learning constraints, and adapting to virtual feedback from students, often without visual cues. He asked the students and community participants to focus on three core principles: timing, connection and purpose. This intervention therefore provided an opportunity to maintain connectedness in a virtual setting focused through a movement therapy program.

For recruitment, the free dance classes were advertised through informational flyers, focusing on the no cost and no need for partner aspects of the course, circulated through email. The lessons initially focused on the basics of three partnered style dances. However in Week 4, following the request of a student participant, a shift was made to line dances. We quickly realized that this style of dance was optimal to teach in a virtual setting because the patterns do not traditionally require a partner which accommodated participants living alone or with others. In the first 8-weeks of classes, teaching skills were sharpened and student feedback helped determine best methods for presenting the lessons on virtual platforms. Microsoft® Teams was used as it was readily accessible to both students and other community members.
At different points in the lesson plan development, the professor consulted with his dance teacher who provided coaching to strengthen his new dance teaching skills under the crisis situation. Techniques were strengthened that included video on-screen technique demonstration, repetition to facilitate student learning of footwork, lesson pacing, and planning to include a basic pattern followed by creative intermediate versions.

The final line dance lessons consisted of a collection of five different 16 to 36 count, four wall patterns that were repeatedly practiced during one class to music of different speeds. These classes began with easier patterns at slower speeds, progressing to faster music and more complicated patterns. This structure enabled students to become comfortable with the overall dance, gain confidence and bolster wellbeing. This model was utilized, following a 3-week break, to develop an evaluable, 8-week, 5-session virtual line dance program. The goal of this initiative was to bring together students and community members in a virtual setting during a time when physical interaction was not possible, to help dampen feelings of fear, anxiety, and depression, and provide students and others who participated with emotional revitalization, particularly for those living in isolation, and a new movement therapy routine that builds confidence, creativity and hope.

Evaluation

For the first 8-weeks of free classes the instructor and one graduate student exchanged field notes (written within 24 hours of each lesson) on what could be improved in terms of the approach. This was an unplanned action but provided a historical record of qualitative assessment and evaluation of what worked well and where improvements were needed. As the virtual dance class was established in a time of crisis, there was no formal class registration or assessment process. Classes were not recorded so there were no audio or video recordings to
The instructor and graduate student conducted a manual review of field notes, documented between April to June 2020, using Microsoft® Excel to catalog and code select notes. This produced a thematic analysis which identified five emergent themes: video/audio-technology selection; dance selection; music selection/synchronization; student and participant engagement; and choreography-music synchronization. The instructor and graduate student reviewed and discussed the resulting themes to assess completeness based on their independent review of records made. As shown in Table 1, we also identified lessons learned and opportunities for program development.

**Challenges and Successes**

Given the program’s development during an ongoing crisis, there were a number of successes. Participation was a win given the newness of the program; likewise, it was free to participants. Participants not only came from the student body, but also included other university faculty and community members from New Jersey, Ohio and Indiana, creating new social connections for participants. Second, development of the line dance program curriculum was created while teaching a new dance each week; this is a testament to time-management and fast-paced curriculum development. Most importantly, the classes opened an opportunity for participants to strengthen mental wellness and reduce anxiety given the isolation experienced during a time of extreme stress adjusting to an altered life during the COVID-19 pandemic. A key challenge was the distress some students were under due to their own fears for family members; this affected participation rates in the program (i.e., fewer students may have been motivated to participate if they did not feel they had the time or energy). Classes were held on Friday or Saturday nights each week, given that social establishments were all closed. For some this made the class appealing, but for others scheduling may still have been a problem. Table 1
provides more insights based on themes identified from the instructor and student’s field notes and reflections.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Next Steps

A second 8-week program followed this first program and additional field notes were captured to allow for future methods analysis with appropriate CDC Healthy Days measures for influence on participant wellbeing (analyses are ongoing). The select community members that participated enriched the program experience for the student participants, especially under the lockdown situation. Future applications of this intervention should consider additional community members involvement, also at the discretion of the dance instructor/faculty member and participants (i.e., encourage participants to invite family and friends). This can elicit more participants to join while simultaneously keeping virtual class sizes, and hence functionality of virtual programs, manageable.

Implications for Practice

While this program may have been simple for experienced dance instructors, it was a testament to what can be created in the face of adversity. Practice implications include first the opportunity to expand on the program beyond its base programming in the future. The intervention provided a virtual opportunity for building social connections and improved mental well-being among individuals experiencing stress (e.g., college students, faculty and community members). Second, should future lockdowns ever occur due to another crisis, pandemic or weather hazards, this program can serve as a model for other communities and colleges to adopt, particularly if faced with future social or physical distancing protocols. Last, this program held great experiential value in community engagement and service learning for students to see an
example of how one can recognize a need and creatively devise a simple yet novel intervention to help people in need.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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References


Table 1. Lessons Learned and Opportunities by Emergent Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
<th>Lessons Learned</th>
<th>Opportunities for Development</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Video/audio-technology selection</td>
<td>• Need ease of use for range of users&lt;br&gt;• Selection process for determining best teleconferencing capability required participant engagement/trial and error</td>
<td>• Synchronization of instructor audio and music audio in virtual setting can be challenging&lt;br&gt;• Selecting best fit wireless blue-tooth microphone and synchronization with music audio output</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dance selection</td>
<td>• Recognize speed of learning for beginner dancers (focus on gradation – slow, medium, fast-paces)</td>
<td>• Build on emergent creativity to broaden diversity of line dance patterns&lt;br&gt;Focus on simpler patterns first and build to more complicated patterns</td>
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| Music selection-synchronization | • Increased awareness of music copyright law and usage rights  
  • Matching music tempo to complexity of dance patterns  
  • Diversifying music genres used | • Explore and advertise different music genres to engage wider audience  
  • Ask participant feedback on musical genres |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Student and participant engagement | • Have a diverse mix of music genres  
  • Empower students to help plan the dance program | • Strengthen recruitment and registration strategies to grow participation  
  • Continue to build on health and wellbeing benefits for all participants |
| Choreography-music synchronization | • Create variations of each dance taught for intermediate lessons | • Continue building competency in understanding dance choreography to music synchronization |