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

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1 **Assessment of Need**

2 In January 2020 a large-scale pandemic, caused by the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2
3 (i.e., COVID-19), swept through global communities, crippling national economies, taxing
4 health systems worldwide, and massively transforming the way education was delivered
5 (Kickbusch I., et al., 2020). Across the United States, starting in February/March 2020, there was
6 an expanding sense of fear, anxiety and depression as the virus spread (Zhai, Y., & Du, X.,
7 2020). As the severity of the pandemic was realized, community lockdowns began and social
8 distancing measures were implemented in mid-March 2020. In Florida, in particular, cases of
9 COVID-19 continued to climb into June and July 2020: according to the CDC, Florida
10 maintained some of the highest case counts in the country (Centers for Disease Control and
11 Prevention [CDC], 2020), reinforcing the continued importance of physical distancing and
12 closure of many social settings. The limited social connectedness during this time underscored
13 the need to maintain class and community connectivity. One professor at the University of South
14 Florida’s (USF) College of Public Health, a prominent research university in Florida, who had
15 focused his life outside of school on dance training for three and a half years, conceived of a
16 dance training intervention to help his students and others during this continuing pandemic.

17 **Overview of the Intervention**

18 With the growing uncertainty associated with indefinite lockdowns, anxiety, fear, and
19 depression were setting in for the college students and faculty alike. One professor decided to use
20 an online conference platform to bolster mental health and well-being for students and
21 community members by hosting a virtual dance class every week. This was in response to
22 interest from students in the college and with the motivation of other experienced dance
23 instructors who were also trying to determine the best virtual tools to continue their classes.

24 Given the circumstances surrounding the lockdown and the novel nature of this intervention,
25 particularly the professor's novice as a dance teacher, select community members were invited
26 based on personal connection with the professor.

27 Dance training was an ideal focus of the intervention as it is a movement therapy with
28 numerous physical and mental health benefits including: management of anxiety and depression,
29 improvement of self-esteem and betterment of motor skills (Ward, 2008; Murcia-Quiroga, et. al.,
30 2010). Part of the novelty of this effort lay in the fact that the professor was new to dance
31 instruction, despite being a long-time dance student. The rapid transition to dance teacher
32 required focusing on the language of dance, determining what virtual platforms were most
33 efficient and what lessons were compatible with virtual learning constraints, and adapting to
34 virtual feedback from students, often without visual cues. He asked the students and community
35 participants to focus on three core principles: timing, connection and purpose. This intervention
36 therefore provided an opportunity to maintain connectedness in a virtual setting focused through
37 a movement therapy program.

38 For recruitment, the free dance classes were advertised through informational flyers,
39 focusing on the no cost and no need for partner aspects of the course, circulated through email.
40 The lessons initially focused on the basics of three partnered style dances. However in Week 4,
41 following the request of a student participant, a shift was made to line dances. We quickly
42 realized that this style of dance was optimal to teach in a virtual setting because the patterns do
43 not traditionally require a partner which accommodated participants living alone or with others.
44 In the first 8-weeks of classes, teaching skills were sharpened and student feedback helped
45 determine best methods for presenting the lessons on virtual platforms. Microsoft® Teams was
46 used as it was readily accessible to both students and other community members.

47 At different points in the lesson plan development, the professor consulted with his dance
48 teacher who provided coaching to strengthen his new dance teaching skills under the crisis
49 situation. Techniques were strengthened that included video on-screen technique demonstration,
50 repetition to facilitate student learning of footwork, lesson pacing, and planning to include a
51 basic pattern followed by creative intermediate versions.

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

63 **Evaluation**

64 For the first 8-weeks of free classes the instructor and one graduate student exchanged
65 field notes (written within 24 hours of each lesson) on what could be improved in terms of the
66 approach. This was an unplanned action but provided a historical record of qualitative
67 assessment and evaluation of what worked well and where improvements were needed. As the
68 virtual dance class was established in a time of crisis, there was no formal class registration or
69 assessment process. Classes were not recorded so there were no audio or video recordings to

70 reference. The instructor and graduate student conducted a manual review of field notes,
71 documented between April to June 2020, using Microsoft® Excel to catalog and code select
72 notes. This produced a thematic analysis which identified five emergent themes: video/audio-
73 technology selection; dance selection; music selection/synchronization; student and participant
74 engagement; and choreography-music synchronization. The instructor and graduate student
75 reviewed and discussed the resulting themes to assess completeness based on their independent
76 review of records made. As shown in Table 1, we also identified lessons learned and
77 opportunities for program development.

78 **Challenges and Successes**

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

93 provides more insights based on themes identified from the instructor and student's field notes
94 and reflections.

95 INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

96 **Next Steps**

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

106 **Implications for Practice**

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

116 example of how one can recognize a need and creatively devise a simple yet novel intervention
 117 to help people in need.

118

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 121 their participation and critiques during the dance program.

122

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137 **Table 1. Lessons Learned and Opportunities by Emergent Theme**

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Emergent Theme	Lessons Learned	Opportunities for Development
Video/audio-technology selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need ease of use for range of users • Selection process for determining best teleconferencing capability required participant engagement/trial and error 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synchronization of instructor audio and music audio in virtual setting can be challenging • Selecting best fit wireless blue-tooth microphone and synchronization with music audio output
Dance selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize speed of learning for beginner dancers (focus on gradation – slow, medium, fast-paces) • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build on emergent creativity to broaden diversity of line dance patterns <p>Focus on simpler patterns first and build to more complicated patterns</p>

<p>Music selection-synchronization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased awareness of music copyright law and useage rights • Matching music tempo to complexity of dance patterns • Diversifying music genres used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore and advertise different music genres to engage wider audience • Ask participant feedback on musical genres
<p>Student and participant engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a diverse mix of music genres • Empower students to help plan the dance program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen recruitment and registration strategies to grow participation • Continue to build on health and wellbeing benefits for all participants
<p>Choreography-music synchronization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create variations of each dance taught for intermediate lessons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue building competency in understanding dance choreography to music synchronization