

Creative practice as personal and professional recovery

We are never truly still, we are constantly moving, developing, expanding, growing... our bodies, our practice, our understanding. To do this takes time, awareness and a good amount of mistake-making. But what happens when you get stuck, the channels get blocked or the mistakes feel too big to overcome? Practitioner-researcher, **Emily-Rose Cluderay** reflects

Early 2017. I am sitting in one of the offices at De Montfort University having my first supervision for my final major project. My proposal: to teach babywearing dance classes with women in the postnatal period and use reflective practice and analysis of their experience to see what impact it might have on their postnatal wellbeing. Teaching babywearing dance is not new to me; alongside the bread and butter of teaching dance, drama and performing arts in schools and academies, I developed these classes – known back then as Sling Beat – to provide women with an opportunity to take part in physical activity with their baby in tow; to friends and the non-initiated I called it ‘Zumba – with a baby attached’.

But these can be no ordinary dance classes. This is a practice-based research project for an Arts Masters. ‘You’re going to have to do more than simple exercise to music’, explain my tutors. This sentiment had also been echoed a few months previously when I had visited Creativity Works in Bath and spoken to Creative Wellbeing Manager Pippa Forsey, who suggested if I missed out the creative element of the class I would be doing the women a great disservice by not introducing them to the possibilities of creative practice.

I don’t disagree, but I am sceptical. Over 10 years working in the arts as a dance practitioner accepting the gigs that best pay the bills has left me feeling disillusioned, and a long

way away from my training which emphasised the value of creativity and individuality. Year after year of being asked to ‘do a routine’ has left me wondering whether there really is a place for the intuitive, creative, individualistic practice I so loved when I first started out.

Unknown to many, I was also fighting an inner battle as my chronic mental health issues increased their grip on my life, and I came to terms with a body I was unfamiliar with, having gained weight following major reconstructive surgery on my ankle. As Miranda Tufnell says: “When we lack felt awareness of our bodies, we lose connection with an innate bodily intelligence that underpins how we look after our health and well-being”(1), and it was this very sense that something needed to shift in order for me to find my place again as a practitioner that was driving me to seek out solutions.

It was amidst this fog – fighting rising anxiety and trying to redefine my relationship with my body – that I started the MA in 2014, with a sense that something needed to move, to shift, to change. The first year was an uphill slog, as I found myself feeling completely at sea in the now-unfamiliar world of academia. Nothing made sense; it was all big words, and even bigger ideas. If anything, I was even more disillusioned as I tried to make sense of my identity in the dual worlds – academia and ‘real life’. Reading about other peoples’

practice just seemed to emphasise how far away my life was from the arts world I had once inhabited so happily. As I read about the transformative potential of the arts, I was acutely aware that I was yet to experience it myself as a practitioner.

I can’t quite pinpoint the exact time things started to shift, but with encouragement from the faculty and my mentor Sally Doughty, I tentatively started to explore mental health in both performance and practice. Rather than trying to shape my practice with abstract ideas, I looked within, following my gut, and applying the theories and practices I came across to my own unique experience, allowing things to sit and simmer in my mind and body as I grew accustomed again to trusting my intuition. A chance invitation led me to watch the documentary Embrace(2), and I started to view my body as my interface to the rest of the world and as something to be treasured and celebrated. As I reconnected with my body and its possibilities, synapses started firing and I saw all my experiences – the good, the bad, and the challenging – from the last decade, stretching out behind me like lined-up dominos, waiting for the final piece.

The final domino in the line-up was the project Stepping Out With My Baby. It came at the very end of my studies, and was the culmination of two years of exploring, questioning and honing my practice.



Emily-Rose Cludera with participants, Stepping Out With My Baby.
Photo: Steph Gore.

Eight women, each carrying a baby, came to a class once a week for six weeks, taking part in a mixture of choreographed repertoire and creative exercises. The first time I introduced a creative exercise, it was hard to tell who was more nervous, them or me. I started simply, easing them in with simple improvisation games, and this developed into using 'found' movement from their lives as choreographic stimulus.

Each week I led them through extended movement improvisation and choreographic tasks. As my confidence grew, so did the length and depth of the exercises. One participant referred to it as "guided creativity... it was like you were taking our vulnerability and holding that for us." Yet what the participants didn't know was that I shared that vulnerability and the creative exchange between us was helping me just as much as it was them. Each time an exercise was successful, it helped to rebuild my belief in the work I was doing. I stopped 'apologising' for forcing creative activities on the group and started to get excited about the possibilities. Somewhere along the way, I realised that I was, in fact,

going through the same process as my participants. By trusting in myself enough to let go and allow my body to do the talking, I was facilitating not only their transformations, but my own.

Recently, I came across the notion of creative practice as mutual recovery; the idea being that the health and wellbeing benefits of arts activities can extend beyond those for whom the intervention was originally intended, building "resilient communities of mutual hope, compassion and solidarity"⁽³⁾ including participants, carers and practitioners who all have the potential to experience the growth and development of resilience that is a key factor of mental health recovery.

As a practitioner, creative practice as personal and professional recovery has been the biggest surprise of my career. The transformations experienced by participants of Stepping Out With My Baby were mirrored in me. As they found their identity and purpose as mothers, I found my identity and purpose as a practitioner. Witnessing these transformations and expressions of

creativity and identity joined the dots between practice, profession and personal. As I reflect on the journey – both physical and psychological – I am reminded of a favourite mantra, "Obstacles are detours in the right direction"⁽⁴⁾ and I am grateful for the detours that have led me to today and continue to keep me moving forward on my path.

Info

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Emily-Rose is continuing her babywearing dance and postnatal wellbeing research as a Phd student at the University of Derby.

References

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