



On Dance Classes for Young People with Impaired Vision

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Group activities are important working environments for people of all ages. When engaged in an activity, people get a chance to learn – in addition to activity-specific skills, dexterity, and appreciating the arts – different social skills as well. It may be challenging for disabled people, or people who need special support for some other reason, to participate due to a variety of factors, which puts the feeling of being a part of something and the skills learned from it in danger.

I am an expert on applied and inclusive art, a dancer, and an instructor of inclusive dance using the methods of dance improvisation and Dance Ability.

Organising dance activities for special groups requires methodical dedication with attention to minute details. A large part of planning and addressing safety issues is to think about accessibility. According to the Pirkanmaa regional cultural welfare plan 2017, ‘accessibility is considering the different needs of different people and promoting equality when planning and producing services. Accessibility comes from e.g. unobstructed pathways, spreading understanding, and removing the physical, social, and economic factors that prevent participation. Good accessibility enables everyone to participate and enjoy cultural activities.’

How to Create a Safer Space?

When a person is building up the courage to try a new hobby, what might hold them back boils down to nervousness and questions of safety. The instructor is also thinking about safety but including the perspective of responsibility.

Safety is an issue that can be addressed from many points of view. On one hand, it can be seen as the safety of the space; on the other hand, it can be seen as a personal experience, or as a combination of both (Niemelä, 2000). Safety can also be seen as a feature of the physical working environment, the actions and visible behaviour of people in it, as well as a person’s experience and awareness of it. Referencing Niemelä’s thoughts

on safe space, I categorise safe space – in the context of the dance class and teaching – using the following three interconnected categories:

1. Physical space – accessibility of the space
2. Social space – atmosphere – acceptance and understanding
3. Individual private space – growing confidence on oneself and one’s skills

The prerequisite for a dance workshop or for planning and teaching dance classes is that the instructors have enough information on the participants. Having enough information helps the instructors, for example, consider factors related to safety, the participants’ need for support, and how well suited the space and materials are for the class.

In my experience, the instructor or teacher of special groups can easily feel under pressure for being expected to know everything and to do the right thing in every situation that they encounter. At the same time, I feel that openness and asking direct, respectful questions are never insulting; on the contrary, as they open the possibility for mutual learning and dialogue.

The instructor should not get stuck on the possible diagnoses or limitations of participants. It is more important to focus on what connects us and what kinds of exercises can be done together. When planning, instructors can also focus on how to apply different exercises to a particular group.

Physical Space

Establishing the safety of the physical space begins at making sure the space is accessible: in other words, thinking about how one enters the space and how one moves about there. How, for example, can the doors be opened, are they heavy, or are they opened by motion detectors? Are there stairs or steps on the way – if yes, are there lifts or ramps available? How high up are the lift buttons? How large is the space when considering the number of participants in a dance class and their possible assistive equip-

ment? How large are the lavatories? Is the space echoing? Can the echo be reduced? Is there furniture that takes up space? Are there sharp corners or objects one could bump into and hurt oneself? How could these injuries be avoided? And this is just a few examples. The Culture for All service has gathered a comprehensive information package on accessibility for all workers and producers in the cultural field.

Creating a sense of safety together with visually impaired participants begins at the start of the class with getting familiar with the space. It begins at the entrance, going from one end to the other while counting steps, and getting a sense of the size of the space and remarking where the middle is. The instructor is simultaneously describing what the space looks like and where the possible furniture or other obstacles are. The space can also be visualised by feeling the different wall textures and naming them, for example, window wall, ballet barre wall, and entrance wall.

It is a good idea to create a clear structure right from the beginning for the class or the full-day workshop which then continues in a roughly similar way throughout the season. With special groups, the need for clear structures and repeating routines is heightened. When the participants know roughly what happens, when it happens, and how long it takes, it makes it easier for them to focus and relax for the exercises.

Social Space – Atmosphere – Acceptance and Understanding

In a physical dance space, such as a dance studio, there are walls, a ceiling, and a floor, possibly a ballet barre, PA equipment, a piano and lighting fixtures. We can experience all that with our different senses, and all of it has already been constructed. In my opinion, similarly to the physical space, the social space must also be constructed, but that is something to which each of us, each participant, can contribute. The physical space is more permanent. The social space is constantly changing depending on who is participating, what are the emotions that

day, where all of us are coming from, and what kind of day or week it has been. Constructing the social space together brings us more in contact with ourselves, each other, and the dance that is about to begin.

One visually impaired young participant in one of my dance classes pointed out how the participant's own positive body image and social courage weigh on the decision whether to join a group activity. According to them, other contributing factors were the feeling of social safety in the group and, for example, how familiar they already were with the instructors or other participants: 'Perhaps it would lower the bar to participate in general dance classes if there were a couple of encouraging sentences on the organiser's website saying that all types of bodies are welcome, and that the instructors are competent in addressing the needs of special groups to such and such an extent.'

Starting Circle

After getting familiar with the space, we form the starting circle. In my dance classes, I always start the session with the circle with all my groups. For me, the circle as a form symbolises equality, as no one is in front of or behind anyone else, and everyone has a chance to be seen and heard. The circle is a place where trust is formed within the group, and it is a place where everyone has the time and the space to share things about themselves. I always encourage the participants to share if there is something important that other participants should know when they dance and move with them: are there, for example, body parts that are sore or sensitive that should be minded? Are there parts where they do not like to be touched? What is their balance like when they move, or anything else that's relevant.

The participants can also share how they are feeling: tired, energetic, nervous etc. Then I, as an instructor, can encourage people to accept all their feelings, and that no one needs to feel anything else for anyone else. This kind of encouragement creates an atmosphere of acceptance and is the foundation for trust and libera-



tion. If a participant uses aids to move, such as a wheelchair, it is good to verbalise it and demonstrate how the wheelchair moves and how the participant wishes others to move with them and their wheelchair.

When working with special groups, I invite the assistants of participants to join the starting circle as well, so they have a chance to introduce themselves. Although the assistants may not otherwise join the exercises, I feel it is important for the participants to notice all the people in the room.

The Significance of the Assistant when Taking Part in a Group Activity

One of the key factors for persons with disabilities or special needs in participating in group activities is the number of assistants and how they can offer support in both physical and social interactions.

Assistants can be either the personal assistants of participants or, alternatively, general assistants. Although a participant might only need physical help and support in, for example, moving, the presence and aid of an assistant automatically affects the social space as well. Therefore, I consider it important that if there is a personal assistant involved, they are aware of their role during the guided part of the exercise: do they take part in the exercise, are they observing from the side, or are they in a completely different room but still available for the participant?

In some cases, the activity or passivity or the participants is affected greatly by whether the personal assistants are family members or not. A family member, such as a mother, can create a sense of safety as a personal assistant, but at the same time the mother can – consciously or unconsciously – be overprotective and in so do-

ing limit their child's activity. The parent might think and do too much for their child, and the child, although they might be an adult, cannot practice their independent decision making and creativity.

The Inner Space of the Individual – Growing Confidence on Oneself and One's Skills

When the dance studio, the physical space, has been mapped and introduced, and a relaxed and trusting atmosphere has been created inside the group, the social space, all the useless nervousness and stress can be removed, and energy can be redirected towards developing skills, playing, creativity, and exploring the inner worlds and resources of the participants themselves.

One visually impaired young person in my dance class described to me how trust and a relaxed state of mind enabled them to feel and study their own sensitivity and boundaries, as well as finding connection with others: 'When there is that type of trust, there is no fear of doing something "wrong". Interaction with others does not always require words or eye contact. A strong connection and understanding can also be found through movement and touch. I had powerful experiences of listening to others' body movements and being heard myself, confronting others as equals, where statuses, bodily abilities and other external factors became meaningless.' ●

Sources

Pirkanmaan kulttuurihyvinvointisuunnitelma 2017.

Culture for All service.

<https://www.kulttuuriakaikille.fi/en.php>

Niemelä, P. 2000. Turvallisuuden käsite ja tarkastelukehikko. Teoksessa P. Niemelä & A. Lahikainen (toim.) *Inhimillinen turvallisuus*. Tampere: Vastapaino, 1–37.

Exercises

Exercise 1

A safe space can be defined by three aspects: physical space, social space, and the person's inner space. Explore your own physical safe space.

Study the space where you are with different parts of your body either by yourself or with your group. Go to a corner and yell, test the acoustics – what do you hear in different spots? Is it the space cold or hot? Are the textures soft, rough, or smooth? What is your safest place in this space?

Exercise 2

The article refers to feedback from a participant: 'Perhaps it would lower the bar to participate in general dance classes if the organiser's website contained one or two supportive phrases on how all kinds of bodies are welcome, and that the instructors are trained to address special needs in such and such a way.' Study the word choices and language used in the communication of your activity with a critical eye. How could you, through communication, create a space where everyone could feel welcome?

Exercise 3

Imagine a situation where you are a new participant in an activity group which includes both people with different kinds of impaired vision and people who can see. Your task is to introduce yourself by describing yourself and your appearance to the group. Avoid mentioning, for example, your age, profession, or education. Describe yourself in as tangible a manner as possible.