



The experience of embodied presence for the hybrid dance/movement therapy student: A qualitative pilot study

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1. Introduction

Opportunities for online and distance learning have increased dramatically over the past decade (LaGasse & Hickie, 2015). Educators are left with the responsibility of integrating their area of study into the realm of technology while retaining the core competencies of their field. For Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) educators, the task has become to bridge somatic and technological experiences. DMT is a clinical psychotherapy field that views the body's nonverbal language as a direct form of communication (Sandel, Chaiklin, & Lohn, 1993). Dance/movement therapists work with a wide variety of people such as children, families, adults with mental illness, people struggling with addiction, and older adults with dementia or Parkinson's disease utilizing body awareness and movement practices to engage emotional processing. Therefore, educators must bring the body on to the screen and into the minds of the DMT student. As DMT programs begin to design and implement online courses, many questions emerge, the most salient of which is how the embodied learning process can be brought into the online environment.

The purpose of this pilot study was to explore the experience of the DMT distance learning student, and to better understand their learning needs as they align with the educational standards of the field. This researcher focused on the experience of embodied presence for the DMT distance learning student in their DMT core courses. *Embodied presence* is defined as the experience of being both affectively and kinesthetically present to a learning process (Beardall, Blanc, Cardillo, Karman, & Wiles, 2016). This definition connects to best practices utilized across distance learning programs outlined in the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010).

The research question for this pilot study was, "What is the experience of embodied presence for the DMT distance learning student?" This author addressed this question through a phenomenological research paradigm to explore the lived experience of the DMT distance learning student. A phenomenological approach allowed the author to examine what experiences these groups of DMT students shared in a hybrid low residency training program (Creswell, 2013), and offered new information around the emerging theory of embodied presence.

2. Literature review

2.1. Dance/movement therapy education and pedagogy

Dance/movement therapy (DMT) has been defined as "the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration of the individual" (American Dance Therapy Association, 2017b). As a theoretical approach that is grounded in the body, there is an inherent assumption of movement as a means to communicate and fulfill basic human needs. This sense of communication is found through techniques of observing body action, exploring the symbolism of movement, attuning to and mirroring another's body communication, and engaging in rhythmic group activity (Sandel et al., 1993).

The American Dance Therapy Association sets educational standards that focus on the need for experiential learning where the focus is on experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting to grasp a new concept (Dewey, 1934, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Theories of transformative learning (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) also align with DMT pedagogical practice, encouraging a communicative sense of learning and inviting expressive ways of knowing. Direct practical treatment internship placements and experiential courses are considered to best facilitate the learning of theory and practice (American Dance Therapy Association, 2017a). Because the body and movement are the foundation of DMT, there is an integral learning process for the DMT student of maintaining an awareness of and attention back to their own body. Students are encouraged to embrace the knowledge of the body, both their own and others', as a source of information that can guide both learning and intervention with clients (Johnson, 2014).

2.2. Definitions and applications of embodiment

The learning experience of DMT students is contained in kinesthetic, affective, and embodied experiences. Yet, the questions become: what is embodiment, how does it apply to DMT pedagogy, and how can it be retained in the online environment? Sheets-Johnstone (2010) wrote about the way that movement connects beings to others in a common humanity. She posits that humans are naturally drawn to those who move in ways that are dynamically similar to their own movement

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(Sheets-Johnstone, 2010). Instructors often strive to give students opportunities to experience their own inner sense of body as well as integrating their observation of the other through interactions with peers and, eventually, DMT clients (Beardall, 2011; Hervey, 2007; Schmais, 2004). For example, instructors may ask DMT students to take on the movements of a client with which they have worked. Moving as this person, a student may act as the potential therapist and interact with the “client”. After embodying a treatment scenario, the students would be asked to reflect on what it felt like physically to move like the client, what it felt like in their bodies to engage as the therapist, and what interventions worked/didn't work in the scenario. These embodied practices allow for the DMT student to gain information about the perspective of the client and the therapist in a treatment scenario. (See Appendix A.)

Meekums (2006) wrote about embodiment within DMT training as an “active source of knowledge production” (p. 169). DMT educators encourage students to tune into their somatic responses, observing nonverbal information and integrating this into a clinical view. Through that process, dance becomes a symbol to deepen learning of DMT concepts and human interaction.

Although embodiment is a core principle in DMT pedagogy, the education in the field has shifted in the past 50 years. A recent area of application and innovation for DMT education has been the development of distance learning DMT programs in the online environment. This new delivery method allows students to pursue a degree without needing to leave family, work, and home in order to attend an approved program (Beardall et al., 2016). Studying in a hybrid or distance learning model, opens opportunities to students throughout the world who want to pursue DMT training.

2.3. Pedagogy in distance learning

Both distance learning and DMT pedagogy utilize reciprocal learning methods among students, peers, instructors, and content to create an active process of meaning making. Garrison et al. (2010) wrote extensively about the importance of an active and connective learning process. From this perspective, the theoretical framework called the Community of Inquiry (COI) was developed, which has been adopted and studied by hundreds of scholars and instructors throughout the world (Garrison et al., 2010; Vaughan & Cleveland-Innes, 2013). COI is a process-based model within which three realms of educational experience are defined: *Cognitive Presence*, *Social Presence*, and *Teaching Presence*. These three presences each have areas of overlap and integration within a collaborative educational model. Cognitive presence is a realm in which learners engage with course concepts with critical and reflective thinking. Social presence is an area of open communication and group cohesion through which learners can connect with peers. Teaching presence is the instructor's presence within the course environment and is conducted through design, facilitation and direction of the course. The COI describes interaction within and among the course content, the instructor, and the learners and that the interplay of these presences relate to student satisfaction (Garrison et al., 2010; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Theoretical the COI framework states that deep, integrated learning occurs at the intersection of these three presences. The overlap of these concepts offers an educational experience that supports engagement with material, with active discourse, and with the containment of the course, provided by the instructor.

In the measurement of both the effectiveness of online learning and the experience of online students, interaction is often seen as a primary focus (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Several studies have focused on the creation of community and connection within an asynchronous or blended learning experience (Armstrong, 2011; Austin, 2010; Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Duarte, 2015; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Harnish & Bridges, 2015; Koper, 2015; LaGasse & Hickle, 2015; Rovai, 2002; Vaughan & Cleveland-Innes, 2013). Findings of these

studies have shown that success is not determined by the technology itself, but rather by how the instructor uses the technology to encourage deep learning within the online community.

The music therapy (MT) field has begun to study the implications of distance learning on their pedagogy (Vega & Keith, 2012). The perception of community was recently addressed in a mixed methods study conducted by LaGasse and Hickle (2015). A sample of 42 music therapy students ($n = 41$ female, $n = 1$ male) were surveyed to determine perception of learning and perception of community. One group received distance learning instruction ($n = 28$) while another group ($n = 14$) received resident instruction in an introductory course in Neuroscience in Music Therapy. Both groups received the same lectures, with the distance learning students receiving lectures via video streaming while the resident group received the lecture in person. Results of a t -test found no significant difference between the distance learning and resident groups' perception of community scores ($t(40) = 0.84$, $p = .40$) while they did find a significant difference between the two groups' perception of learning scores ($t(40) = 2.85$, $p = .01$). Qualitative data, in the form of written comments ($N = 44$), indicated that having community with peers helped increase the students' perception of learning.

2.4. Creating the online body

During the summer of 2013, faculty at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts launched a hybrid low residency expressive therapies program with a cohort of 10 DMT students. The students attended a three-week residency that was then followed by online course work. DMT educators began to adapt their classroom experientially-based learning to the online classroom. Through the use of online video tools, discussion boards, blogs, and synchronous meetings, the embodied experiences of the DMT courses were translated to the online environment. For example, the previously mentioned assignment from the face to face classroom, where the students are embodying client and therapist could be adapted for the online classroom. Students could embody a client via video and share this with their classmates in a class-shared blog. As other classmates witness their peers' videos, they could reflect on their own physical reactions to this client's movements and share in the blog how they would choose to intervene with this potential client. Also, synchronous tools could also be used to facilitate group connection by viewing peers in movement and then responding with one's own video movement response to mirror the face to face classroom experience. (See Appendix B.)

In the context of this new educational format, Beardall et al. (2016) developed the term *embodied presence* when applied to DMT pedagogy in this program. Modeling their terminology from the Communities of Inquiry format (Garrison et al., 2010), Lesley's DMT faculty began to include the body's experience within the structure of teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence as a part of an integrated and collaborative learning process.

Translating the intuitive concepts necessary in DMT pedagogy into a distance learning format can bring many challenges and concerns. For example, research in distance learning has studied the lack of non-verbal cues in online communication and has found that the strengths of text-based communication often more than compensates for these concerns in other subject areas (Garrison et al., 2010). Yet, the specific body-based experiential learning needs of the DMT student have not yet been studied in the context of online learning. DMT programs strive to integrate knowledge and clinical skills, self-awareness, and the interrelationship of movement theory and practice (American Dance Therapy Association, 2017a,b). As educators in both ADTA approved and alternate route programs begin to use technology and asynchronous tools in their training programs (Fraenkel, 2015; Lesley University, 2015; Pratt Institute, 2015; Tortora, 2015), these new opportunities bring questions of how the distance learning format can maintain the embodied and experiential learning necessary for the DMT

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