

THROUGH DANCE AND MOVEMENT VIVE LA DIFFERENCE: CREATING RELATIONSHIP

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The following is a presentation made by Heather at the International Consortium of Intergenerational Programs (ICIP) Conference, in Melbourne from 26th-28th June 2006



Heather – pictured with dance group

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"The quality of a nation is reflected in the way it recognizes that its strength lies in its ability to integrate the wisdom of its elders with the spirit and vitality of its children and youth" (Margaret Mead, 1971, p.193: quoted in Gonyea, 1999).

We live in a society which very much tends to group like with like and in the context of generations this means old with old, adolescents with adolescents, young families with young families. There are many reasons for this, which I won't attempt to go into here, but perhaps part of it is the feeling that being

with others like yourself makes for more understanding and more harmonious living. However, in living in this way, we have in fact lost something and this realisation has been the starting point for the many intergenerational programs which have sprung up in recent times.

What then is that lost "something" the intergenerational experience offers? I chose the above quotation as the starting point of my presentation, because I believe it emphasises the fact that the value of the intergenerational meeting lies not in emphasising or reinforcing similarities, but in its celebration of

difference. In my experience of running intergenerational programs, the "magic" has been in the chemistry created through the interaction of those opposite ends of the life cycle – the very young and the very old.

There are other questions too. What is the nature of the intergenerational experience? How can we facilitate an experience which is truly intergenerational, that is, which is a meeting and an interaction between generations. Clearly it needs to go beyond simply bringing old and young together.

The purpose of this paper is to describe one intergenerational program which I ran some years ago and in so doing to tease out some answers to the questions raised above.

THE PROGRAM

The impetus for this, my first dance/movement intergenerational project, came from an article by Sandel and Mason-Luckey (1985), two American dance therapists who ran a series of intergenerational dance therapy sessions as part of a larger intergenerational creative arts project, called Touch. Having worked (separately) with older adults and with young children, I was excited at the prospect of bringing both groups together. I was fortunate in having in my area an equally enthusiastic coordinator of the local Adult Day Centre and the primary school principal, who always embraced new and enterprising ideas. With some knowledge from the intergenerational

literature and lots of enthusiasm, we submitted a proposal to the local Shire council, which was successful, and proceeded to plan and set up the program.

Dance as a basis for an intergenerational experience

Before going on to describe the program, it is useful, perhaps, to briefly describe my orientation as a dance therapist running a movement and dance program, since dance therapy may be unknown to many of you.

- As a dance therapist, I recognise that people live and relate through their bodies, and I therefore use my understanding of the human significance of movement and the inherently therapeutic aspects of dance, as a way to work with people on all areas of function (emotional, cognitive, social and physical).
- Dance therapists very much work in the context of relationship – relationship to oneself and relationship to others.
- Dance therapists work with what is meaningful to the people they work with. Therefore, the focus was very much about working with the participants on what was meaningful to them.

Aim of the program

Thomas (1993) points out that despite the good intentions of some intergenerational programs, they may in fact reinforce negative stereotypes of older adults as “recipients of services rather than as a group of people who are independent and capable of giving advice and sharing experiences or ideas” (p.86).

The aim of this program, then, was very much about creating meaningful relationships between old and young; where they would know each other as real people rather than as “child” and “old person”. The activities therefore had a focus on working together on creative movement explorations, and on facilitating a context where individuals felt safe and willing to be fully themselves in the group.

The Program

This was a nine-week series of sessions, involving twelve older adults at the local day centre for frail elderly, and eight grade one children from the local state primary school. Two day centre staff also attended, plus a teacher volunteer. I facilitated the session. The program consisted of movement exploration, voice, singing, props, musical instruments, adapted folk dance and drama, carried out with partners, in small groups and in the large group. Although the content of sessions varied from week to week, care was taken to keep certain group rituals, for instance in arriving/greeting and leaving, to provide a secure structure. Another ritual was that towards the end of each session, participants would

be asked for a word to describe the session. Then one adult and one child would go up and choose a fabric for the texture of the day, and attach it and write the word onto a long piece of calico, which became the collage of the program. At the last session, children and adults shared afternoon tea and the adults presented the children with certificates. Children showed the videotape and the collage to their classmates and the collage was hung up at school for all to see. Later, parents and children came together at the teacher’s house to look at the video. This brought up a lot of discussion and talk on the parents’ part about their relationships to their own parents. Both older adults and children loved the program and didn’t want to see it end. Indeed it is a program which is still fondly remembered by the children and the school fourteen years after the event.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROGRAM

Challenges:

From a dance therapist perspective, there were challenges in terms of differing energies – children being all about ongoing energy with difficulties in controlling it, stopping the flow; older adults having more difficulty getting going, and having physical limitations in terms of the length of time they could maintain energy. Spatially, adults were more constricted, needing encouragement to use more of the space; children on the other hand could literally get “lost” in space, so required spatial structure. The challenge for me was to bring together these different qualities in a way which would work for everyone.

The shared space:

A space had to be created which could hold these two groups. There were beginning and ending rituals to clearly mark the shared space and time. Structuring of space and channelling energy – allowing older adults recuperation time, and children opportunities to let their energy go at full throttle. This structure gave us a safe and contained space to begin our shared explorations. As an example, we used a fishing image, whereby the adult had to pull in the fish on a fishing line. The fish could be cooperative but chose usually to be uncooperative, wriggling, rolling, jumping until finally hauled in. This created a connection between child and adult, gave the adult a role in the activity, while allowing the child the opportunity to use whole body movements and full on energy.

In the early weeks, the focus was on emphasising similarities, things shared, while allowing “space” to accommodate differences. However, later on the structure became much more free and differences could safely be accommodated without threatening

the relationships. Indeed the differences were celebrated and added to the creative mix. In this I believe the group relationship very much mirrored the progress of any relationship, from tentative connections, to establishing common ground, and only later feeling confident enough to allow in and accept differences.

The group also began to develop its own form and its own impetus with less input from me as facilitator. Creativity and spontaneity increased. An idea would be taken over and developed by the group. In one movement exploration the group spontaneously built an image of being seated around a giant ice cream container, scooping, smearing and "fighting" over the ice-cream. Suddenly the children moved into the centre and became the ice-cream moving around as the adults sprinkled imaginary hundreds and thousands over them - then the children sprinkled them on the adults!

Relationship:

Children and adults did connect and form relationships at an individual level. I no longer had to structure the sessions to create adult/child partnerships, rather they formed spontaneously from natural bonding of individuals. Relationships were developed through working together on creative tasks. Movement themes further reinforced relationship, for example mirroring each other's movements, exploring a movement relationship, taking care of or supporting one's partner, approaching and leaving, offering a safe place to return to. In one exploration, the adult became the place of safety and the child had to cross a crocodile infested swamp (the rest of the group providing the snapping and generally threatening sounds!). Hugs of welcome were often the greeting on arrival and, where physically possible, the adult assisted the child's safe return across the circle.

Acceptance/tolerance:

Children were sensitive to the fact that with some adults they might need to be a little less boisterous. Von Rossberg-Gempton, Dickinson and Poole (1999) in their study of two groups – an intergenerational creative dance group and a children-only creative dance group - concluded that the older adults appeared to have had a positive effect on the social skills of the children in the intergenerational group. The children "showed an increase in quietness of behavior, showed an increased concern, tolerance and respect for the limitations of each other as well as the elderly..." (p.320). Adults also became more comfortable with having young people around. For instance, one lady who found the noise level disturbing at first, soon became an enthusiastic mover and shaker!

Meaning:

Many of the activities, apart from simply being fun and creatively interesting, reflected themes of relationship (approaching, meeting, being with). In the crocodile activity noted above, there was acting out of the older people taking care of the young, one of the roles attributed to older adults ((Kopac & Price, 1987). Adults very much felt they were the hosts and wanted to give the children a good time. Old and young appeared as natural allies – having fun, playing together – the old no longer having that serious parental responsibility. Children had the opportunity to play to an appreciative audience; adults enjoyed surprising children with their own mischievous sense of humour or by their own adventurous physicality. There was much enjoyment sharing childhood songs and games, though it has to be admitted that the older adults' songs were not all strictly politically correct!

In other words, the sessions offered activity which was meaningful to all participants – they were fun, but they also played out the sorts of roles and relationships which are part of the being of the very old and the very young. They were experiencing something which should be and has been something quite natural, but which is not always the case in our society.

Creativity (which is of course related to meaning):

What was most exciting was to see the amazing, creative things which arose from the combined bodies, energy, imagination and life experiences of old and young and which became much more than the simple addition of two different populations.

Beyond the group:

In the course of this program, others in the community were also touched – the parents, the local school. Ideally this project would have been the start of a wider involvement between the day centre and the school. (Unfortunately, the day centre was moved to a nearby town, so this was not possible)

REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERGENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE

In previous times, and in some cultures today, daily living was and is intergenerational but in our society, I suggest, it takes skill and active fostering to make for a positive intergenerational experience – and one which will give the benefits attributed to it.

From the experience described above, I will conclude this presentation by teasing out key aspects which I believe are important in intergenerational programs.

Program philosophy/emphasis:

Fostering a relationship which is mutual – a relationship of equals where there is give and take, sharing of active and passive roles – and authentic

(that is, old and young relate as individuals, not members of a group “old”, “young”). It is worth noting the dictionary definition of the prefix “inter”, as “mutually, reciprocally”. It is about equality in interaction.

A particular space (environment, or context):

A space which can contain and facilitate the development of relationship.

A space which can foster a process where young and old can meaningfully interact. This involves both working specifically on building relationship and on creating meaningful activities, which young and old can share.

Program characteristics:

Relationship work/group process. The process of moving from tentative connection through similarities to accepting difference needs to be actively fostered.

Opportunity to take on (developmentally) natural roles. For example, in the dance/movement program, the older people were able to enjoy the boisterous energy of the children and play audience when they came with a new song from school. At the same time the older people were able to assume their role of nurturing and taking care of the young, and of passing on some of their experience.

Meaningful shared activity. Working together on something mutually satisfying.

Reaching out/community connections

In a small way, in our local community the program did reach out, but sadly was not able to foster anything ongoing. However, it is important that one builds into such programs outreach into the wider community and ongoing joint activities. Such intensive programs as the dance/movement program should be the starting point of something more everyday, and something which is built into the fabric of the community.

I can find no better way to finish this paper than with the quote I keep returning to when I try to sum up the intergenerational experience. It comes from one of the young participants in the dance/movement project whose word for the day was “friends”, because “we needed friends to do what we did today”.

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Postscript:

I was attracted to the **International Consortium of Intergenerational Programs (ICIP) Conference** in Melbourne, 26th-28th June 2006, because of my long-held interest in bringing old and young together in meaningful ways, as well as my ever-present desire to raise the flag for dance therapy. However, I wasn't really very sure quite what the conference would be like. Fortunately, it proved to be a very worthwhile experience which broadened my whole perspective on this area of work.

In the first instance, I came to understand that the concept of “intergenerational” was much broader than “old” and “young” and that it extends to all generations. The underlying philosophy of intergenerational programs is that the health of a society depends on all generations - old, young and everyone in between – interacting, living and working together.

It also goes beyond discrete, time-limited projects, to concepts of activities which could be sustained by communities and integrated into the life of communities.

The presentations I attended were given by people who were passionate and enthusiastic about their projects and the projects were many and varied: an ongoing “old mates” project in a Victorian country town where school children are individually linked up to an “old mate” (who can be of any age), with whom they spend an hour each week; a drama project in a former mining town in the U.K. where students interviewed retired miners, and then created a dramatic piece out of the stories; a research project covering a number of arts-based youth projects in various states of Australia.

For the closing event of the conference we were all invited outside onto a rooftop garden high above

Flinders Street to participate in an Aboriginal smoking ceremony. There amid the high rising towers of modern day Melbourne, we acknowledged and remembered the traditional owners of the land. The emotion and connection experienced in this ceremony was a fitting end to a conference which celebrated the power of people in community.

Ed. Note: See 'Australian Moves' p.33. Heather was invited to write a description of her intergenerational program, which has just been published in the Journal of Intergenerational Relationships.