

# Using props in Dance Movement Therapy (DMT): The Hula Hoop

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In recent conversations at the DTAA conference (Melbourne, July 2015), as I was speaking about the use of hula hoops in my group work, I shared I had been writing a document about the use of props in dance movement therapy (DMT). I was encouraged to continue with it as there is a lack of written material in this area. . I hope that this writing will generate further contributions from other DM Therapists about their use of other props.

Prop is short for property which is a term used in theatre for materials used on the stage in plays. Dancers of course also use props in performance.

As DM Therapists, when we imagine Marian Chace dancing with patients, we see her in a circle formation. While that is true, she also danced with them individually as well - to begin with to firstly meet each person just where they are at, for example. We are trained to sensitively meet our clients in this way. Some groups require input to begin to move and activate, while others may be active and require movement to help focus and contain. With one particular group I worked with I discovered that props helped them to engage in movement.

Props can be used by DM Therapists as tools for warming up groups, for setting boundaries, for initiating movement, and / or for connecting group members, as well as for exploring various movement qualities. I have experimented with many props in groups and regularly use hoops, Octabands and balloons. I have also used balls and canopy scarves (small parachute size).

Hula hoops, I might guess, have been utilized by DM Therapists for decades. I use the plastic hoops found in toy sections in many stores. They are a particularly successful, common prop that I have used with children, with developmentally disabled adults, blind disabled adults and most recently in a group with an acquired brain injury population.

The recent group of adults with acquired brain injuries that I worked with, all lived in a small residential community house. They mainly displayed a limited range of movement, and in general, more use of gestural movement rather than postural is apparent. The use of their Kinespheres is generally restricted to near and middle range and the integration of their limbs and body is often compromised by their injury. Some clients are in wheelchairs and others use walking frames. Their level of mobility varies. The hula hoop has become our method of warming up and beginning the session.

This began as a way to encourage active movement with a man who could stand and walk. He was a very mobile man while most of the others were in wheelchairs. He was often already

in the lounge when I arrived. I encouraged him to stand and use the hula hoops to explore a variety of movement before the rest of the group came. As a result this extended to become my warm-up for members of this particular group. As he and I explored movement together, I began to see the possibility of offering each person a hoop to begin the session. I then used it as a way to check in and see how everyone is - at that time in the day.

The first person to come was given the first choice of colour and as the others arrived, we are beginning to move together. Some have colour preferences and some choose a different colour each week from a range of green, yellow, pink and etc hula hoops. I say to the first person to arrive, *You are first today so you get to choose any of the colours.*

When engaging with each participant individually in the beginning, both of us hold on to two hoops. While many props we use have stretch and give to them, the hoops do have some of this, but they also have a stability and solidness that allows direct mirroring, and leading and following with similar forces. Each mover has their own style and dance from the way they grip the hoop to the familiar movements they engage with. We may hold both hoops with both hands or hold each hoop in a single hand as we try movement on different levels, symmetrical or asymmetrical movements, and /or vigorous or more sustained ones.

One day as we were warming up, I asked the group members to find an adjective to describe themselves that started with their first initial. While I helped them choose some like 'Strong' and 'Brave, another chose ' 'Awesome', we repeated this a few times. I moved in partnership with them noticing how they become more animated, how they smiled at each other and how they sometimes laughed as they moved with the hoop. One newer client said to me that the way we began this session ..... *"tunes me up for the day"*.

Initially checking in with individuals in the group, and asking them how they are today, often resulted in the one word response of *good* or *alright*. This time is used to meet and greet and notice who is in the group on that occasion. The two men who can stand and walk have already instigated the exploration of hoops as a warm-up, discovering a variety of ways to use the hoops when on their feet. I ask them to stand for this exploration using as much of a variety of movement as possible in the beginning as their

tendency is to sit down in chairs later in the group.

Many different movement explorations came from using the hula hoop as an intervention with this group. These included encouraging individual movement patterns, explorations and dances that developed. Some examples of these are that some clients may begin with bending the arms forward and back, while others may pass the hoop from side to side, sliding in one continuous circle. The explorations varied depending on the movement range of the client. After repeating and mirroring their initial movement sometimes someone suggested an alternative direction or that we try on someone else's movement. These include lifting the arms up and down, swinging from side to side as well as asymmetrical movement of one arm up, one arm down.

One man who now no longer resides in the home, and who stood with me early in the session, discovered reaching the hoop overhead. He was a tall man and would reach his hoop with one hand to touch the ceiling. He often laughed and smiled as he did this. He also initiated passing the hoop around his body that I later extended into a lasso movement overhead that became a regular exploration in the group. We played with a variety of ways to step in and out of the hoop as well as stepping from side to side, which led us to create almost a waltz of moving forward and back and side to side. We also use the hoop to lift a leg and he initiated a swing with the leg which I encouraged in other ways such as bending the knee and holding the foot to balance on the other leg. We would move as the others arrived and we would greet them and welcome them into the group! On another day a new woman in a wheelchair joined the group. As she witnessed this man reaching to touch the ceiling she too extended her arms to lift the hoop towards the ceiling. She said with a smile *"I am surprised that I can do this!"* and for the rest of the session continued to share her appreciation of the movements she could accomplish.

Another client in the group has little visible motivation although he is very able physically. I often asked him to stand and he initiated a movement lifting the hoop overhead and stretching side to side. I encourage him in other familiar movements such as stepping through the hoop, or balancing using the hoop to hold one foot and a lasso movement overhead and bringing it behind us. With this particular participant I encouraged some choreographed movements and when he grew familiar with

them, he was able to attend to engaging his whole body in them for longer periods of time.



I often encourage participants to combine movements - movements that have evolved from the group members - to extend and/or join them. For example, if a participant begins moving with bent elbows forward and back but within a near to middle reach space I may ask if we can stretch further or change the effort from lightness to strength or in a different direction, side to side, or up and down. Usually as I encourage lifting up I can feel in the hoop how much physical tension (bound flow) there is in the movement of the person I am sharing the hoop with, and can perhaps encourage more free flow by changing the rhythm to accommodate the exploration.

At one stage in the group a participant whose whanua (family, sister and mother) would attend the session with him, would encourage him to move with the hoop and engage with the other group members. The sister would often move with him and she would look to me for ideas of how to move. He often initiated pushing the hoop with his sister. It was lovely to note them laughing together demonstrating their close bond and connection with each other.

Another movement, particularly appropriate for clients in wheelchairs, is the hoop behind shoulder blades and lifting up arms over head, encouraging body symmetry and extending and lengthening the arms. With some of my wheelchair clients I can use my movement range to dance out to the sides, sometimes creating something like a waltz. The hoops can even be used to create a figure 8 through the shoulder joints. This begins to add shaping and 3

dimensional movement and relates to one of Bartenieff 's (1980) basic 6 excises, called the 'Arm Circle'.

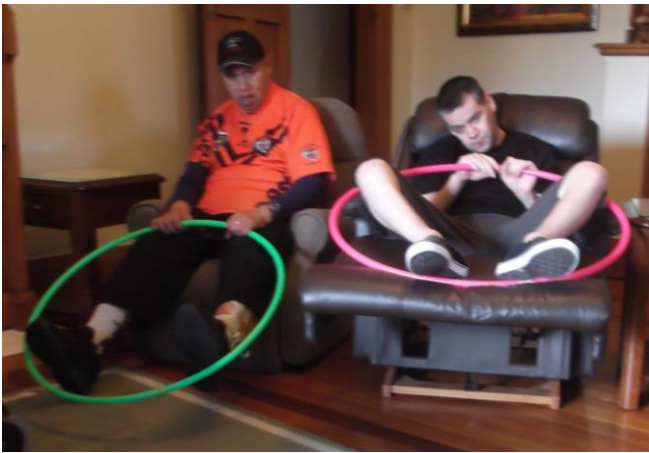
One of my former clients has a hemiparesis which causes him to be functional on his left side but to have limitations on his right side. I assist him in holding the hoop with two hands and we engage in a dance of as much variety as we can. Sometimes he holds the hemiparetic hand with his functional one or the right hand manages to keep holding on. His degree of tension varied so we just played with what was possible on that day. He and I discovered that the lasso movement overhead could be a challenge, as he might catch the hoop on his wheelchair, and yet when he was successful, he smiled and laughed, and we played with the cowboy motif of imagining catching someone or an animal with the hoop. He was highly motivated and would try movements he saw more mobile clients engage with, such as standing up and putting the hoop over his head. Sometimes other group members put the hoop over his head and around his neck. I have also encouraged bringing the hoop to the shoulder area and leaning back by holding the front of the hoop which works well when sitting.

Another movement we discovered in duet together was holding a hoop in each hand and opening and closing the arms whilst we moved back and forth. This elicited an image of sawing wood and preparing wood for the winter. Another time we were catching fish and each person shared their favourite fish.

After individual dances I often sat down to explore leg movements. We could use the hoop to lift a leg or foot off the ground, one leg at a time, or both together. One of the images that arose from this was using the feet on the hoop like pedals in a car. Often a patient will initiate holding the hoop up and say he is driving a car. Through this we discovered that two of the participants drove trucks, and we were able to explore where we are driving to. This led to an exploration of using the hoop in 'planes', that is in the Door, Vertical, or Horizontal Plane. And another movement we discovered was placing the hoop on our thighs and moving the head and torso through the hoop, folding in at the thigh sockets to encourage a more postural movement exploration for those who were able.

One of my newest clients began to encourage others to hold his hoop as well and in doing so, formed a circle linked by the hoops in-between. This led to a quite regular exploration.





We each held two hoops connecting us all together as one group. Someone suggested we made “a pretty picture” as we moved together, with sometimes someone singing or humming.

A game of rolling the hoop was also one of our discoveries. This developed from group members experimenting with the way they rolled the hoop, bounced it, or spun it. Someone once initiated rolling two together, and then that become three. Another movement was passing the hoop across the circle. Sometimes a client will require prompting so I ask, *would you like to roll, pass or spin it*. Clients took on various roles in this game; some coach others and cheer them as they succeed - since this requires some mastery and fine tuning of coordination. Sometimes the clients speak about the sports they once played, or the ones they enjoy watching. Sometimes someone will catch the hoop with their foot and leg and this creates a challenge, so we try to pass this it with a foot to another person.

Another example is that one person likes to place the hoop in his chair or couch where he is sitting so they stand up between the cushions. We joke about him building his house or car and that facilitates some imagery exploration. As we talk about the car, we identify the colour and make. We sometimes have one or more cars. Then we discuss where we would drive and what we would do there. One day one patient said *I would go to the pub!* When we create a house we discuss whether it is a house or a bach (beach house), where it is and what we may do there. I have occasionally added scarves in to this creation. The images need to be minimal as there is some literalness that arises, as some group members have difficulty with words and expressiveness, not to mention the more complex abstract though processing that needs to take place.

Most of the clients in this group have some individual physiotherapy that requires a hands-on approach to extending movement options. The

group offers a very different way of extending movement. It allows the clients more control over their choice of movement by encouraging their personal expressivity to also increase their range and options. The hula hoop is one of many props that can be used in a group situation like this, but here, it is a particularly valuable prop. It acts as a tool to connect the DM Therapist with each client as the session begins. Then later it provides the opportunity for connection for the whole group and for them to create other activities.

Due to the hula hoop’s slight flexibility, we can feel and experience each other’s movements, without invading anyone’s personal space. At the same time as a prop it is firm enough to be supportive when needed as well. It is a concrete object, light enough to hold and yet can be used with strength and force when moving in partnership. One day, a staff member watching the group was heard to say “*It lifts you up*”.

Although I have used many props in many different ways, I found this group particularly responsive to using the hula hoops. The process of developing movement and dance activities from their use, drew on, and came from, a mutual creativity stimulated by the group.

## Reference

Bartenieff, I. with Lewis, D. (1980). *Body Movement: Coping with the Environment*. The Netherlands: Breach and Gordon Science Publishers.

**Photos:** from Connor Kelly.

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