

Professional Development Day for Dance Therapists

Wesley Institute, Sydney - July 2004

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Robyn has a BA, Grad Dip Movt & Dance (Melb Uni), Grad Cert Dance Ed (UTS), is studying for a Postgraduate Diploma in Dance Therapy at Wesley Institute in Sydney and is employed at a special school one day a week working with four very different groups of children, from 5 to 16 years of age. She has a longstanding involvement in dance, as a student, teacher and performer, and is enjoying the move into the challenging world of dance therapy. Robyn also works part-time as a marketing writer.

Earlier this year, Wesley Institute hosted a professional development day for dance/movement therapists and those interested in dance therapy or allied movement forms. With the number of dance therapy graduates increasing in Sydney, it is prudent to build a network of NSW-based people who are practicing or interested in the field in order to enable sharing of ideas and experiences and to provide a support base.

The day was divided into two parts: an Authentic Movement workshop presented by Linda Murrow, dance therapist and lecturer at RMIT, Melbourne; and a workshop on post-natal depression and dance therapy, presented by Juliette Kirkwood, a graduate of Wesley Institute. The day ended with a time to meet each other and share our dance therapy experiences.

Linda offered a 2.5-hour experience of authentic movement to the group of 25. Despite being such a large group, Linda's approach invited trust and offered insight in return. The warm up, asking each participant to express how they felt in movement, with the whole group joining in, started everyone moving and gave us a chance to take in a little of the other people in the room.

Individuals were then asked to draw a representation of their life, to move it, and from that, to develop a repeatable movement phrase or motif. Then they were asked to share their experience with another, to show their movement phrase, and then to discuss it. In expressive arts therapies, it is found that the use of movement, art or music offers clients a means of expression, a way of uncovering unconscious material and themes that verbal therapy can take much longer to uncover. The exercise here was to combine three different expressive modes at once. The result was an intensification of the process. The drawing supplied the material,

the movement clarified it and the talking offered an opportunity to understand it.

The second half of the session moved into the true authentic movement experience, finding the movement from within, with Linda assuming the role of witness for the whole group. Rather than moving in response to an external stimulus, that is, the drawing, authentic movement invites the client to be moved from within, to find an internal stimulus, to follow an impulse. After the moving, we created another drawing, looking to express the shape, feel or meaning of the movement and seeking to deepen and clarify the experience. Again, we shared our drawings with a partner, but this time there was a chance to look at similarities or differences between the two drawings we now had, and to discuss the relationship between the first and second movement experience.

From there, it was time to move between the two movement experiences and find a final movement phrase. Comparing the two invites the client to find relationship between them and in creating a single movement phrase, to notice what happens when they are joined. Divided into two large groups, one group showed its 'phrases' to the other group. This performance was an opportunity to make a final statement about the work that had preceded it. There was a feeling of conclusion that would ensure participants were not left open or unsafe at the session's end.

In closing, there was time to reflect on and share our experiences and, given the introductory nature of the workshop, time to ask questions. One group member was struck by the power of the drawing to express unconscious material and to deepen his experience and understanding. One dancer had found it difficult to find the inner movement impulse. Another had said she was really able to work deeply in the authentic movement mode. I found that previous material re-surfaced and that by working in this multi-

layered approach, I quickly clarified the motifs and achieved a personal shift.

After a short break, it was time for Juliette's workshop on postnatal depression, a condition that has not received much attention in the dance movement area. Juliette detailed the background and movement characteristics of the client group and introduced some typical activities from the program she has run at a residential centre in Sydney. From her observations, common to the condition is a reduced use of space, both personal and environmental, a lack of sense of self and a lack of motivation. As a mother of two young children, I started thinking about mothers with young babies in general. All first-time mothers suddenly find themselves in a new job for which they receive little or no training. All need to come to terms with the end of a previous identity (without children) and the acceptance and integration of a new one (mother). While some women revel in the changes, others find it challenging. With or without depression, all new mothers could gain enormously from participation in a dance therapy program such as Juliette has devised.

In all the activities Juliette offered, I found myself having a lot of fun. A warm up was guided by movement words. The aim here was to encourage clients to move their bodies in their own ways. Juliette moved from concrete movement words to emotion-charged words, opening up the opportunity for awareness of how emotions impact the body. We played a game of balloon volleyball, complete with imaginary net, in which the level of stimulation was lifted by adding additional balloons until there were 4 or 5 going back and forth. The act of reaching for the balloons extended participants' use of personal space. With just

one balloon, I found it quite mesmerising and gentle. The adding of extra, different-coloured balloons one at a time stimulated the senses and the reflexes, the energy level lifted and the speed increased. The need to communicate with other group members also increased. When all the balloons were going back and forth, it was a real here-and-now experience.

The group stayed divided into two. One was given three words and a choice of props and was asked to move in response to the musical accompaniment of the other group. A range of musical instruments that included two empty water cooler bottles (a marvellous sound, I must say!) made way for what was an extraordinarily satisfying group experience that stimulated the senses and encouraged group members to express themselves in a very safe environment. I remembered, as I beat the water bottle or danced with the group, that I could be myself and not just somebody's mother.

At day's end, many participants retired to the student centre for refreshments and an informal sharing of dance therapy experiences. The opportunity to share with other members of the dance/movement therapy community is incredibly important as many of us work in isolation in various types of workplaces. There is a lot of combined experience, growing every year in NSW and I believe regular workshops and exchanges will help us build the profile and expertise of the profession in our state.

A big thank you to Linda Murrow, Juliette Kirkwood, Evelyn Defina, Brenda Stevenson and the students from Wesley Institute. And thanks to Wesley Institute for providing the venue.