

A journey toward professional membership: Timor-Leste and beyond



Meredith Elton

As one of the dance-movement therapists (dmts) volunteering as part of this project, I found the experience of working in Timor-Leste to be incredibly valuable and supportive of my journey toward professional membership - well beyond its contribution to my necessary supervision hours.

I am a dance artist and dance-movement therapist (dmt) based on the southern Gold Coast. Whilst I completed the Grad Dip in Visual and Performing Arts (Dance Therapy) in 2003, I have only recently become interested in practicing as a dmt and committed to pursuing professional membership with the DTAA. The almost ten intervening years have been full of my own dance and performance explorations, most recently through PhD research in Performance Studies (Community Dance).

I was initially attracted to the opportunity to volunteer in Timor-Leste because it offered intensive on-site supervision, a focus on a client population that I had little experience with (people with disability) and the possibility of fundraising to cover the associated costs. As a self-employed artist in the throes of establishing a dmt practice, the costs associated with supervision are a significant challenge. Being based regionally, there are very limited opportunities for on-site supervision or to observe/co-facilitate work with a new client population.

During my two weeks of volunteer work in Timor-Leste I completed over 30 hours of supervised practice, making this project a cost effective and intensive way of gaining experience and supervision hours. I successfully raised over

\$2000 to cover my travel and living expenses in Timor: I gave a presentation at a local Rotary Club, approached local philanthropists, posted a link on Facebook and shared the project with family and friends. I focused my fundraising efforts around the dual benefits of working with people with disability in Timor-Leste and the potential application of these skills in my own community. As well as raising funds, my efforts served to promote the work of Many Hands International and my own practice as a dmt and to raise the profile of dmt more generally.

As Kim warned, one reality of a project like this is that the exact nature of the work – in terms of the client populations and groups worked with – emerges on the ground. The political unrest we encountered on our arrival further challenged our plans. We were unable to work with some of the groups in our initial plan and ended up doing only a small amount of work with people with disability. Yet working with a range of groups and populations developed my skills and confidence in applying dmt fundamentals and supports my work with new and varied clients in my own community, including people with disability. In retrospect I would have been more general in my approach to fundraising.

The personal and professional gains from volunteering as part of this project far exceeded my initial goals and expectations. The biggest positive for me was the learning, inspiration and sense-of-community I experienced working as part of a team of dmts. I was challenged to share and expand my own skills and supported in navigating the considerable unknowns involved in working cross-culturally, in a post-conflict situation with a diversity of groups. Tasting the power, relevancy and complexity of dmt applied beyond my own local context was deeply affirming of my journey as a dmt and of my particular interest in working cross-culturally.

Contributing to this article, and another for the American Journal of Dance Therapy about our experience with dmt in Timor, enables my professional relationships with project colleagues Kim and Alex to have a life beyond the intensity of our time in Timor. It is relationships such as these that link me to a vibrant community of dmt practice and sustain me on my journey toward professional membership and beyond.

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