

Bringing Dance into the Classroom Through Flashmobs: One Teacher's Journey

By Joanna Gertler

This is the journey of Lili Steer, a Grade 8 teacher at an urban public school in Toronto, Ontario. She stands in front of a classroom of students, all with various learning strengths and needs. She is told she has to introduce and include dance into her curriculum. As Steer states in the video case study on www.sharingdance.ca, "I'm not a dance teacher. I've never taught dance before. And here, I have to teach dance."

What led to an epiphany for Steer was learning about a flashmob that Canada's National Ballet School (NBS) had organized to celebrate its 50th anniversary and International Dance Day, on April 29, 2010. Having seen a YouTube video of The Sound of Music flashmob performance in Antwerp, Belgium's Central Train Station, Steer was intrigued and thought it would be wonderful to participate in such an event.

NBS had created instructional videos for the flashmob and posted them on their website, making it was easy for Steer to access and share these videos with her class. Steer explains,

The choreographer had broken the routine down, and it matched the Language curriculum beautifully...I thought, "here is integration," because the dance was split into parts but there was an overall theme, and students have to learn how to take a theme, write about it in paragraphs with topic sentences, support sentences, summary sentences, and evidence.

In fact, Steer found that the dance routine had a 'language' to it, had movement to it,

and had all of the components of language integrated into it. The themes, supports, evidence, and summations were all there, and all she had to do was to put the elements together.

Steer began working on the flashmob with her Grade 8 class of 30 students, and she knew she had her work cut out for her. She knew that she needed all of the students to participate successfully, but was aware of an attitudinal issue that some of the students had towards dance. Her class consisted of more male than female students, many of who did not feel comfortable dancing in front of their peers. She was aware of the challenges ahead on many levels.

Pedagogically, Steer knew she had to begin where the students were comfortable. Knowing that they could all clap, her first task was to ask the students to demonstrate a clapping routine. Steer explains, "I made it a lot of fun because it involved just eight beats and banging on the table." The next step was a bit more complicated, and she called this clapping routine Boom, Snap, Clap. Steer used a combination of tools to help address her students' differing needs, including verbal instruction, kinesthetic learning modalities, and visual images. All

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of these methods helped put the movement into a form of notation to support students' learning and understanding. She found that while some students learned through hearing, others did so through feeling, or physically moving. Steer explains,

So we did it with Boom, Snap, Clap. Students did it in groups, some did it in pairs...Then we had them make up their own variations. When that was successful, I thought, "OK, how am I really going to motivate them?" And the kids wanted to know: how do they measure their success?

To measure student success, Steer turned to the language used in the Ontario Ministry of Education's curriculum rubrics, where at level four, or 80% and above, students' understanding is considered "thorough" or "consistent." Steer describes her thought process,

If they've performed it once, is that consistent or thorough? By showing that it can be done consistently



indicates a level of mastering skills. The students could see this. They could hear when they were successful, because they got the rhythm – and you could hear them banging. If they weren't successful, you could hear it. They were able to access the feedback immediately.

From the outset, some of Steer's students had determined that they would not participate in the flashmob. This was partly because the video had come from NBS, and according to Steer's students, the ballet world was not one in which they could find common ground. However, over time Steer saw that these students were enjoying themselves, despite their initial responses. Steer described how this learning also gave her students a sense of how to successfully learn as a group. Steer describes, "This whole exercise was more than just learning how to dance. It was learning how to treat each other with respect and dignity."

In time, the flashmob became Steer's 'carrot' with her students, to the point that a rehearsal would be offered as a reward for completing other tasks. Steer explains, "If the students needed a bit of motivation, I'd say 'Okay, let's get this work done. If everybody gets the task done, what would you like to do as a reward?' The students would

respond, 'Let's dance.'" Steer was awed and overjoyed at this development.

Steer's Grade 8 class performed the flashmob in front of the school body and parents. The whole event was a hit! This success spurred Steer to teach a flashmob again the following year, using a new routine offered by NBS. She found that other students in the school were envious of those involved in the flashmob, and asked her if they could also participate. With a supportive principal and vice principal it was decided that all students in Grades 4-8 would learn the new routine: a total of 300 students. Scheduling rehearsals required a lot of planning, but knowing that the routine was available online allowed teachers and students to access it at home. The school was on a mission to integrate technology into more areas of the curriculum, which meant that the online videos, laptops, desktops, and data projectors were all used to help achieve that objective. Steer describes:

We realised we could open it up to whoever we wanted to. So all of our teachers in the junior and intermediate grades were invited to teach the routine to their class. Some teachers embraced it wholeheartedly, some were ...well, its such a new way of teaching. It was difficult for them to embrace.

As with the first routine, Steer found students learned the routine in different ways:

If you have a group of students you're going to have a few who will see the video and learn it so quickly [that] they become the teacher. Then you become the facilitator. You're bringing the internet to the classroom; you're providing the space, the time, the structure, and the behaviour management -which we have to do all the time anyway.

Steer found that the learning of the flashmob dance provided a leadership opportunity for kinesthetic learners who seldom had the opportunity to shine in the classroom. Steer notes that she "was surprised who in my groups would respond in this way. You never really know until you go down this route who really has this [leadership ability] as a strength."

This routine was set to K-os' song, Crabbukit. Steer was able to use the language of the lyrics in her English classes, just as she had done with the previous year's routine. The class researched the meaning of the lyrics and found it was something that they all could relate to. Since meanings had to be inferred, literacy was brought into play, as were the Language curriculum expectations for Grade 8 students. Steer explains, "So many

of the students connected to our dance activities through the lyrics, through the language of the song.”

Again, Steer found different ways of notating the dance to suit the different learning styles of her students. Some students found it easier to learn by counting each beat, while others used words to indicate the required action/motion. Once a ‘language’ was connected to the movement, it helped students to learn and retain the steps. For another student group, a visual/graphic representation was developed. And then there were those who only needed to watch the videos to learn the dance steps. By combining all of these methods, Steer was able to motivate everyone to learn the dance.

Steer’s students performed this flashmob at the Ontario Science Centre. Steer offers a summary of the experience of learning, teaching, and performing flashmobs:

The arts provide an amazing sort of discipline that you just don’t get

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through the other subject areas you teach. When you want 150 children to be silent, to hear the downbeat cue to begin, and you’re going to wait for it ... they learn that 150 people really can be quiet, and not move, and then begin together and do a routine accurately, precisely and end it with such a sense of achievement. The students have learned the discipline that’s required to get there, and that’s amazing. I couldn’t achieve that in any other subject area except when you’re doing something like this. And the sense of pride they have is amazing, and that was evident

because when we did it at the Science Centre and they did all start on cue... when they finished they themselves were screaming and re-joicing. They knew they did a good job. They knew it was well done and that was just wonderful to hear.

Steer’s school, Beaumonde Heights Junior and Senior Public School, has continued to participate in subsequent flashmobs organised by NBS. Check out www.sharingdance.ca for the 2014 routine: an upbeat African Caribbean-style dance number choreographed by Patrick Parson.

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