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Injury Reflection Paper: Modern Additional Make-Up Assignment
“A Taste of the Medicine”

Fact: Injuries suck. As a dancer, they tend to come out of no where, they take a while away, and we do not enjoy taking the time off to care for them. But is there a benefit to being injured? My first response is no, absolutely not.

As both a dance and kinesiology major, my primary focus is to bring better medical care to dancers, especially when faced with injury. No matter what a doctor says, chances are that dancers are still going to dance. My career goal is to be that person that allows dancers to keep on dancing as much as possible, while actively working to heal. I have had my fair share of injuries, however – like many dancers – it is very rare that I take time off. Prior to this injury, I could count on less than one hand the amount of times I had sat out of class for the past two years. This time, I pushed myself too far and ended up having to take an extensive amount of time off and taking it easy. Although my career goals are to keep dancers dancing, more often than not, rest is the one and only thing that can heal – especially if the primary goal is to eradicate the injury. It’s the advice I give to my friends and my friends to me. Rest is the frequent prescription for nearly all injuries, and will probably be one of my most frequently prescribed treatments moving forward in my career. This injury and this semester demanded me to take the doctors’, my peers, and my own advice – let yourself heal. From a healthcare standpoint, I am doing 100% the right thing by “taking it easy” but from a dancer standpoint, this semester has been the hardest of my life.

Taking a step back from my personal feelings about sitting out of class, I have now changed my answer to my question. There is benefit that can come from being injured... a strangely immense amount. For most of the time, I had great difficulty sitting and not being able to dance put me into a very negative headspace. With my career goals and my interests – also with my situation not improving at the speed I desired – I decided to try and turn it around for myself. Experiencing an injury that required me to sit out gave me first-hand experience in a psychological and physical space that is unfortunately very common for dancers. In the future, how am I going to be able to tell a dancer to take the time to heal when I myself won't take my own advice? How can I console a dancer that is going through this experience? How can I convince them that this is only temporary?

I took the liberty to do some further research into pain in dancers, dance injuries, and most importantly, the benefits of observation; all as shown by science. In this reflection, I will briefly discuss the commonality of injury in dancers and the culture that is created, then go on to discuss the benefits of observation both from a scientific and a personal standpoint.

Dancing and Pain

Dance is unlike any other sport or physical activity. It blends together two worlds that society would consider opposite – athleticism and artistry. This creates a specific culture and a brand new world seemingly separate from the rest. Essentially, dance is the middle section on the Venn diagram of art and sport. Dancers are unique creatures, often experiencing a certain level of apprehension or a lack of respect/appreciation of their art form, despite the intensity, demands, and beauty of the craft. Dance holds little to no influence or dominance in popular culture. This creates a culture of intense passion and devotion to their craft. Dancers are constantly working,

practicing and perfecting, and rarely take time off from their training. Jeffrey A. Russell – a dance science researcher – writes that dancers develop an “intense psyche” with motivation that “presents unique challenges to clinicians” (Russell, 2013). The same personality characteristics that often promote success – drive, passion, motivation, and responsibility to for action – also lead to an increased risk of injury (Russell, 2013). Dancers place immense internal pressures on themselves to fulfill the requirements of performance that they see as essential to their own craft, making themselves as individuals exclusively responsible for their own success and failure to achieve these requirements.

With regards to external pressures, dancers often tend to create a culture of competition combined with the expectation to live up to certain aesthetic demands. In a study of a contemporary ballet company, “dancers feared that injury, and being in care for injuries was seen as a negative influence on their career opportunities, specifically within company settings” (Pollard-Smith, 2017). They feared that being injured or taking time off for injuries would hold a negative influence over their ability to be cast or re-hired into the company. This fear is common and widespread amongst dancers in any setting.

Normalization of Injury

Internal and external pressures and the culture of the dance world has created a “culture of tolerance” that has been recognized as central in forcing dancers to work through injury. There is a normalization of pain and injury, to almost an extreme extent. A lack of empathy surrounding pain and injury is perpetuated by the idea that “if it does not hurt, you probably are not doing it right”. 84-95% of dancers in professional companies/organizations are injured yearly (Russell, 2013). Dancers tend to engage in self-treatment or simply learning to live with the pain, as most injuries are due to overuse.

College Dancers.

In a college dance program study, 67 percent of dancers self-reported that they had been injured throughout the semester, however the trainers reported that only 30 percent of the dancers in the program had come to them for treatment of injuries (Jacobs, 2012). This lack of treatment is attributed to self-treatment, fear instated by the competitive culture of dance, overuse injuries, and fatigue.

To add to the risk of college students getting injured – unlike the students in this study – most college dancers do not have access to an efficient, consistent method of athletic healthcare. Athletic trainers are reserved only for the athletes, and the on-campus health is primarily focused on disease intervention and prevention, not musculoskeletal treatments.

Benefits of Healing

The commonality and normalization of injury is so engrained in dance culture – and more importantly, in dancers themselves – that it seems almost impossible to separate the two. More so, it is close to impossible to convince dancers to take the time to sit out and let the injury heal to the point where it is no longer a problem. The initial and most important of actually taking the time to rest is that the injury can heal, it is prevented from becoming a chronic problem, and thus the longevity of the dancer's career is greatly increased. Behind the physical benefits, there is a slew of psychological and artistic training benefits that come from taking a step out of class and letting the body heal.

Observation = Motivation

Initially, sitting out can incite a slew of negative emotions – sadness that one cannot dance, anger that one is injured, anxiety of all the other things one could be doing, resentment towards able-

bodied peers... the list is changing and could continue on. However, taking notes and remaining engaged in class can completely turn this experience around. Through observation of my peers, I have found things that I want to work on accessing in my own technical practice. I have indicated this in my observation papers, but one of my consistent focuses in observing was a sense of grounded-ness in my feet. I want to bring more attention to the stability in the muscles of my feet, giving my full weight and trust into the floor, and thus being able to find more articulation and balance from the muscles of my feet. I also want to continue with this feeling of grounded-ness and work on giving myself a deeper, fuller pli  , becoming more generous with my joints and more centered.

Somatic Focus.

Another aspect that I want to bring more attention to is my focus – both physically and mentally. I want to work on keeping my focus in my eyes alive, especially while engaging more fully with my mental focus. I am going to focus on working more on what my body needs in that moment, working with where I am at on that day. Taking the focus away from the aesthetic, from the presentation and turning it into something that is truly internal is something that I would love to be able to access more fully. Being able to find the balance and focus on myself while also being able to find physical focus on the environment and on others in the room is a goal of mine that I would love to achieve.

Career Motivation

As mentioned previously, taking care of oneself for the short term greatly increases the chances of extending a dancer's career in the long term. It also can provide the motivation and confirmation that the dancer is on the correct career path. Having to sit out only gave me more motivation to work harder and smarter when I was able to dance again, because of how much I

did not enjoy sitting out. Additionally, it confirmed for me how upset I would be if I ever chose to give up dance. It is an essential part of my life, and essential to my own personal happiness.

The Science: Action Observation

Aside from the emotional benefits of motivation and refocusing, observing action has been scientifically proven to have psychological benefits over motor learning and control. One study in particular peaked my interest in this subject matter and further justified the benefits of observation. The study was conducted using transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) to examine the activity in the brain when observing action (Calvo-Merino, 2005). The study was conducted comparing capoeira and classical ballet dancers, making sure that these individuals only had motor experience of the actions of their own style (Calvo-Merino, 2005). In essence, the study showed that there is an activation of motor representations – also known as the pathways in the brain for motor control – just through mere observation. It introduced the concept of a “mirror system” that “integrates observed actions of others with an individual’s personal motor repertoire” (Calvo-Merino, 2005). It was discovered that between both groups, there was identical action stimuli that was observed between dancers that were observing dancers of their own style. This showed that these mirror areas of their brains responded in a way that depended on the observer’s own specific motor experience, and thus further proved that mirror system representations are linked to learned motor skills. To summarize the study, “action observation in humans involves an internal motor stimulation of the observed movement”, coding complete action patterns. This further demonstrates an important connection between observation and motor learning that could be applied to enhance skill learning and aid in motor rehabilitation.

My Application.

This study furthered my personal successes by confirming that there is proven, scientific, psychological benefit to sitting out and observing classes. By observing others perform in a movement style that I am familiar with, my brain is actively engaged and firing in a similar matter to as if I were to be performing the action. The incentive for motion is still active, and thus my motor learning, comprehension, and success in eventual execution are working towards improvement. Another benefit is being able to recognize what is and is not working in my peer's bodies, and try to access what it would be like to feel that success or correct that failure.

Conclusion

To conclude, while the actual state of being injured is largely not a positive experience, it can come with great benefits and as a result of the challenges. Psychologically, there is proof that there is a motor learning and physical benefit that comes from observation. Emotionally, I have felt a change in my perception of my own movement and my relationship with dance, among other changes. Physically, I am noticing improvement in my injury, but further more I am noticing a large amount of improvement in my dancing in general. I am working in a smarter manner, with more care and attention to my movement. I am re-invigorated and excited, eager to return back to my full capacity of dancing.

References

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