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Jochelle Pereña

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Through the Lens of Improvisation: Dance Educators Find Voice and Agency through Transformative Conversations

Jochelle Pereña, MFA

Luna Dance Institute, Berkeley, CA

ABSTRACT

Practitioner Exchanges (PXs) at Luna Dance Institute are casual community conversations co-facilitated by dance educators around a topic of dance teaching inquiry. With the physical disconnection of the Covid era, these in-person roundtables shifted to Zoom, and became even more essential in bringing teaching artists together. Educators from all over the world sought out these conversations as a forum for finding their voice and agency, supported by their peers. What made PXs so special and so critical? This article investigates this inquiry through the lens of dance improvisation and presents an emergent phenomenological framework explaining the essential nature of PXs and their transformative impact on teaching artists, their students, and the field of dance education.

KEYWORDS

Improvisation; teaching artists; teachers' voices; agency; transformative conversations

Practitioner Exchanges (PXs) are community roundtables for dance educators, and a vital part of Luna Dance Institute's Professional Learning (PL), that center inquiry, connectivity, and field-building. During Covid, PXs continued and expanded via a virtual platform, and an increasing number of dance educators sought out and expressed their enthusiasm for PXs as an invaluable and transformative resource, sparking an inquiry into *Why? What makes PXs invaluable and transformative?* In PXs participants described their struggles negotiating the constantly changing teaching terrain during Covid, reaffirmed their teaching values, and discovered a collegial community that supported them in responding to the needs of the children they taught. This article explores the voices of teacher participants, and draws parallels between PXs and dance improvisation to detect three qualities that make PXs invaluable: play, reflection, and collective witnessing. While investigating, the impact of PXs was also revealed: the research identified PXs as essential in supporting dance teachers in staying in the field, giving them courage to fight inequities toward children, inspiring personal change, and igniting projects that further dance education.

Practitioner Exchanges

Since 2006, Luna Dance Institute has offered casual community conversations around dance teaching inquiry under different names and formats: Issues of Practice, Lesson Studies, Professional Learning

Communities (PLCs), and Tuesday Topics. The name Practitioner Exchanges was chosen for the most recent iteration to articulate the back-and-forth nature of a conversation amongst peers. PXs are hosted by Luna PLC alumni who choose the roundtable topic based on their own inquiry. Topics have included Dancers as Leaders, Dance in Special Education and Inclusion, Dance and Culture, Agency and Power in Early Childhood, and more. PXs draw teaching artists from private studios and K-12 public and private schools; family dance practitioners; classroom teachers who integrate dance into their curriculum; children and family resource specialists; dance therapists; and those working with children and movement in studio, school, home, and community settings. All participants bring questions to the discussion and all are encouraged to share their experience and expertise. PXs provide dance educators with a forum to discuss what they are observing and learning through teaching, opportunities to step into leadership roles as facilitators, and a collegial network of support in an otherwise isolating profession.

What Happened When PXs became Virtual

Luna Dance transitioned PXs to a virtual platform in April 2020 when Covid regulations limited in-person meetings, and very quickly saw changes in who was participating, how they were participating, how often they were participating, and how they were talking about PXs. Average participant numbers grew from

three to five people in an in-person PX to more than thirty educators from all over the world in a Zoom PX. This led to a multiplicity of diverse voices and perspectives represented. The number of those returning to PXs also increased. For example, participants from certain topic PXs wanted to meet more frequently, resulting in doubling or tripling the number of PXs offered each month, and PX topics and timing evolved to become responsive to the needs and requests of participants.

There was also an increase in number and frequency of participants talking about PXs. They articulated the following:

- “The connection with teaching artists in the field has been a bright spot during this time” (DTA-P).
- “I have found the PXs to be the most valuable resource right now” (DTA-M).
- “These meetings have been encouraging flames for me this school year . . . I sometimes forget the importance of stopping . . . thinking . . . and reflecting. This dance dialogue has been a fresh spark during this strange time in history” (DTA-E).
- “Somehow there’s a container here, I don’t understand how this was created, but it feels like there’s a container where . . . you can just be in the mystery. And something comes out of it, even if I can’t articulate it. So I just feel grateful that there’s just the draw to keep coming back and be present, even if I don’t know why” (CT-K).

Where they might have emailed a brief note of thanks pre-Covid, now participants were explaining why they needed this space, or why they kept returning. This suggested that they wanted to ensure that PXs continued, and that PXs were valuable and impactful beyond the time and space of the event.

As the organizer, Zoom facilitator, and participant-observer of PXs, I also noticed a change in myself after PXs during this time. I felt lighter, like an obstacle or emotion had dissolved and that I had found a moment of flow. I saw myself differently than I had before, as if something inside had shifted. My experience was challenging to convey. I would tell my colleagues, “We had an incredible Exchange last night!” but I could not easily pinpoint why, or even what we had talked about. Instead I described how I had felt: “I laughed; I cried. We danced together and I felt connected,” but these words fell short of the deeper experience. These observations indicated that something unique—a phenomenon—was happening in PXs for participants and for me: PXs were valuable and transformative. As PXs continued, I began to investigate this phenomenon through a methodology that emerged and formalized over time.

Methodology

What makes PXs invaluable and transformative to dance educators and their teaching practice? This question was investigated through a qualitative research study aligned with the phenomenological approach as defined by research scientist Creswell (2013). The study examined the twenty-five Zoom PXs Luna offered April 2020–October 2021, and the voices of the 262 teachers who attended, including: 62 dance educators who taught in public schools, 37 dance studio teachers, 25 itinerant dance teaching artists, 17 university professors, 14 dance educators in private schools, 14 dance educators in community settings, 6 dance education organization administrators, 4 elementary classroom teachers, 4 university dance students, 2 early childhood educators, 2 educational therapists, 1 music teaching artist, and 74 dance practitioners with unidentified teaching roles. Ninety percent of participants taught children 0–18 years-old and families, 5% worked with young adults who were planning on teaching children, and 5% worked with adults. Out of these 262 teachers, 10 participated in PXs monthly or more, 11 participated in 5–10 PXs, 36 participated in two to four, and 145 participated in one.

All PXs were attended by the researcher as a participant-observer, who noticed what was being expressed by voice, body language, and through Zoom’s chat feature. Participant enthusiasm for PXs indicated that something unique was happening was noted. Inquiry questions were shaped to better understand this enthusiasm, and were further tailored to allow the phenomenon—that dance educators find PXs to be invaluable and transformative—to emerge. They included: *What’s so valuable about these Exchanges? Why do people keep coming back? Why do I feel transformed by something so simple, yet can’t explain it? Is anything actually happening here? Am I making something out of nothing? What’s in a conversation?* Regular attendees were asked in October 2020 “Why do you come back to PXs? What makes this space valuable to you?” Over time, without being prompted, increasingly more participants volunteered their thoughts on the relevancy of PXs, and they wove their reflections about PXs into the conversations on their own. All audio transcripts and PX recordings were read and listened to several times. Post-PX follow-up e-mails were sent to participants, which sometimes elicited additional data.

Significant participant phrases/quotations that described their experiences within the data were identified. Participants granted permission to use their quotations as data. Their identities are kept confidential in this paper via a coding system created using their educator role and initial; e.g., dance teaching artist Zara = DTA-Z;

music teaching artist Nina = MTA-N; classroom teacher José = CT-J. Participant phrases were grouped into themes, which were then viewed through and incorporated into a framework of improvisation that described the phenomenon. Findings were validated with participants and the literature, as described later in this article.

As participant-observer, I also wrote about my personal reflections and shifts in this ephemeral communal space. I noted that how I felt after a PX—lighter, more open, like something special had happened, but I couldn't quite capture it in words—was not new. I had felt similar inner, inarticulable, and mysterious transformations in dance improvisation. This observation illuminated what was happening in PXs, and led to viewing parallels between the data themes and improvisation. Improvisation became the research framework through which PXs and dance educators' reflections on PXs as valuable and transformative were investigated. When data themes were examined through this framework, three discrete categories emerged, described using vocabulary found in improvisation: 1) playful process; 2) reflecting in; and 3) collective witnessing.

I am an improviser, and I brought this lens to how I observed, interpreted, and analyzed the phenomenon happening in PXs. Improvisation, and the skills and mind-set associated with improvisation, have inspired similar research beyond the domains of performing arts. For example, researchers have noted that the collaboration, ideation, flexibility, and listening skills found in improvisers are advantageous in other contexts, and have led studies linking improvisation to understanding success in organizational strategy, change management, entrepreneurship, and emergency response (Zenk et al. 2022). In this study, the data around PXs' valuable and transformative nature may be interpreted through a multitude of lenses, and it is the reader who must determine whether my improvisation-based framework is valid based on the evidence and claims imparted.

Improvisation Framework Emerged

The data revealed three prominent characteristics of dance improvisation that taken together present a theoretical framework for viewing what happened in PXs and the phenomenon of dance educators finding PXs to be invaluable and transformative. These characteristics are: (1) playful process, (2) reflecting in, and (3) collective witnessing.

Quality #1: Playful Process

Play emerged as a common theme in all PX conversations. As they discussed Covid-induced changes and

challenges in their teaching environments, PX participants verbalized the value of play for their students and for themselves:

- “How do I make this year about play when everything else has to be acceleration? How do I make the dance space a place of playfulness?” (DTA-H)
- “I'm definitely playing more, making more imaginary worlds, more games more, I mean, this is the way that I'm approaching it, and I'm having more fun too. We got to dance with sheets today. I had a great time.” (DTA-S)
- “I feel like that's where, like, I get to play, you know, and the kids get to play, but I get to play too. And so that's why I feel like those classes are like my self-care because I get to be a dinosaur in a pumpkin patch, you know?” (DTA-G)

Play is the root of improvisation (Nachmanovitch 1990). It is without goals or purpose, and this allows for its liberatory nature, and for the liberatory nature of improvisation (Lemelson Center 2015). When there are no expectations, anything is possible. When you are not rushing toward an end product, you can enjoy the now. DTA-S explained: “Playing is not knowing where you're going. And right now everyone's freaking out because we don't know where we're going. And so we see it in this negative light but then it's like, okay, let's take a step back. Like, to not know can actually be fun.”

PXs themselves became playful in nature, and participants relaxed into conversations that did not demand flawless responses from each other. DTA-S shared: “It's really nice to be in a space that is non-performative where you're not trying to get in something wise to say, where you can fumble through things that you're going through and have other people . . . to see their nodding heads or adding to it, just to fumble together.”

PXs offered and invited the asking of questions, but without the guarantee of answering them. Participants played with questions. They tossed inquiries back and forth, tried them on and took them off, unraveled and wove them together in new ways. They circled around to consider old questions, and fumbled about, messily formulating new ones. This was evident in statements like: “I don't know if I can put this in words just yet, but I'm realizing . . . ” (DTA-S), and “I don't know where I'm going with this . . . ” (DTA-R).

In the non-performative space, participants were released from the pressure of perfection, preciousness, and professionalism. Instead of arriving after work to the Luna library, PXers Zoomed from their cars or from home, with family members, pets, and dinner cooking in the background. Their reflective inquiries

became integrated into their living spaces, rather than remaining separate in their professional spheres. Daily life interruptions—“Sorry, my phone rang . . . Somehow, I got a phone call on my laptop!” (DTA-G) or “And that was my friend’s poodle that I’m dog sitting” (DTA-H)—sparked laughter that added to the atmosphere of playfulness. Feeling the need to move together, PX facilitators began inserting funk, disco, and Motown music into PXs, which inspired improvised dance jams—another example of play.

The ease of attending via Zoom eliminated any transactional expectations of *this better be worth it* that may have previously accompanied fighting through traffic and parking for a PX: “I never could make . . . these PXs because the thought of sitting in traffic coming from San Francisco to the East Bay on a weeknight was like, so anxiety-producing. Now I can just like make a cup of tea and like, sit down and come to the meeting” (DTA-H). “It’s not we’re coming from work and then driving, driving, driving, finding parking. We’re coming in going, ‘Okay. I’m here’” (DTA-H). With a click of a button, participants could arrive attentive, poised for play.

At that place of ready-at-arrival, PXers talked about receiving: “I feel like just showing up, I received. Like it’s a receipt, it’s—just showing up is enough” (CT-K); and about giving: “I love that I have complete and utter trust in the process . . . No one needs to arrive in any certain way, just showing up guarantees . . . Just showing up can be vulnerable” (DTA-M). Vulnerable, a word mash of vulnerable and courageous, acknowledges the bravery it takes to open up and expose vulnerability, to share authenticity, and to fumble about in play. Play, and the playful, improvisational atmosphere present in PXs, invited participants to engage authentically and contributed to the phenomenon of dance educators finding value and transformative power in PXs.

Quality #2: Reflecting from all Angles

Just as play infused PXs, so did a spirit of reflection. DTA-S described the kind of reflection experienced in a PX as: “a step backwards instead of a step forward and that feels really different . . . that feels nourishing, that feels like *get back in*, as opposed to what to do, where to go, what . . . will feed me.” This highlights reflection’s spiralic, rather than linear quality, and the return to one’s inner self in the “getting back in.” Similarly, improvised movement has the potential to reflect one’s deepest, most authentic self. By quieting the mind’s self-judgment and pre-planning, and the desire to move and look “good” or “pretty,” improvisers practice tuning into

the innermost self’s sensations and impulses, letting embodied expressions initiate from there.

In the vulnerable, non-judgmental space of a PX, participants corkscrewed toward their deepest self through verbal reflection, unearthed tender and fragile realizations about themselves, and shared them with the group. DTA-M articulated getting closer to herself and finding a place of unknown:

... that reflection, that offering the space to reflect. And it’s, like, it’s okay if you don’t know exactly what you need. Because I know sometimes I have stress of . . . I don’t know how to take care of myself right now. I don’t know what I need. Like, it’s okay . . . and having that reflection, having that calm, making space for that conversation, that, *that* is the practice, right? Making space and developing that relationship with yourself.

Another image that illustrates this kind of reflection is a crystal, with its multifaceted surfaces referencing the necessity to view one thing—the self—from multiple perspectives. When PXers noticed something they didn’t understand about themselves, they approached it, circled around it, stepped away from it, and returned to unpack it, much like a dancer moves toward, away, in, out, on, off, over, under, around, and through partners and objects in space. In improvisation, this activates the dancer’s three-dimensional, constantly shifting view, and breaks the quotidian movement habit of facing forward. Relinquishing movement habits brings improvisers closer to initiating movement from their inner selves, and surprising themselves by discovering something new in their familiar bodies (Nelson 2008; Smith and Zaporah 2013). In PXs, reflection revealed something new to participants—a bias, or pattern, or discovery to investigate further. The following example taken from a single PX illustrates the corkscrew, multifaceted approach to DTA-G’s reflection, and how that drew her closer to a personal truth and discovery:

I just realized I’m just like, really having trouble letting go of some stupid stuff I said . . . where I used to be pretty good at that before. And now . . . when I mess up, it’s a bigger deal. That’s something that I just came to realize today that I need to work on. And so, I don’t know, maybe you guys can help me with that.

After participating in a conversation that explored self-care and student-care, cultivating joy through play in Zoom dance classes, and the uncertainty of Covid times, DTA-G circled back to her initial curiosity, viewing it from a different angle, and then made a connection between herself and her teaching:

That’s not super related to our teaching, but just for me personally, what you guys are saying is really speaking to me. Okay, . . . I can kind of see why I’m feeling this

way and why I'm really not at ease with anything right now in general . . . Thanks for bringing that up because that kind of helped me put something on my feelings so I can kind of think about, process that . . . I may not always take something from [a PX] and apply it to my work, but I'm definitely applying it to myself. So, that is applying it to my work.

The self and one's teaching practice are deeply intertwined. Due to the non-linear, spiralic nature of the PX, DTA-G was able to dance toward, away, and around in her reflection, to see herself from multiple angles, and consider how unpacking her personal lens impacts her teaching. In the next example CT-C reflected on how stepping back gave her a new perspective and "bigger container" in which to view herself and her teaching, and this pushed her to look inwards at her practice of care for herself and students. "These monthly Exchanges have been just life-sustaining in that they just challenged me almost every class to step back and look at how I'm caring for myself as I care for my students—and with movement! And really just taking in so much as I'm teaching with them and just really, it's just given me a bigger container to hold my classes in and myself in" (CT-C).

Here is another example from DTA-M, reflecting on her excitement about returning to in-person teaching:

I have this idea that I'm gonna play with crawling . . . Because I still have to work out all my, you know, I know I'm gonna exhaust myself in the first 10 minutes of being in person . . . That first time, I just want to get it out of the way already! . . . I'm probably going to start crawling at like 90 miles an hour, which is not how you crawl. And this whole thing is like a big call to like *whew, slow it down*. And I realize that my nervous system really needs that so, so much too. And I'm like, am I picking crawling because *I* need to crawl?

In her reflection, DTA-M shared an idea she had for her students. While talking, she realized she "still [has] to work out all [her]" own needs, and that her idea to start with crawling might be a response to those needs. By asking "am I picking crawling because *I* need to crawl?," she reflected on the lens she brings to teaching, and wondered whether her needs matched those of her students. Looking at PXs through the framework of improvisation revealed that reflection is a quality essential to PXs' transformative and valuable nature, providing participants multiple perspectives of themselves and a closer examination of their own lens.

Quality #3: Collective Witnessing

Along with play and reflection, participants also noted the value of togetherness, seeing/being seen, and learning from each other that they found in PXs. This

framework describes this as *collective witnessing*, another improvisational quality essential to PXs.

Witnessing is integrated into many dance improvisation practices. In Authentic Movement the witness sits to the side and holds space and consciousness for the mover (Adler 1987). In Tuning Scores (Galanter 2004), all dancers are witnesses and all witnesses are dancers who enter and exit the dancing space, and respond through movement or verbal calls to what they observe. Other scores play with dancers following each others' movement by (a) mirroring and shadowing, (b) responding by copying movement and developing it, or (c) offering a contrasting movement. All require a sense of witnessing, watching, and attending to the group.

In PXs, participants witnessed each other through listening. For many, being heard was validating because they felt understood and that they had something to offer: "Throughout the last 18 months, you know, it's been an inspiration . . . to connect with the other educators. Somebody is gonna see you, receive you, understand where you're at" (DTA-M). "Our struggles are very unique . . . sometimes you don't feel entitled to the struggles that you have until you're in a room with other dance educators who are like, 'Oh my gosh, me too.' And then that's so powerful, right?" (DTA-H) Participants realized that they were not alone, that others struggled with similar challenges, and that they were part of a larger community; they belonged.

DTA-H compared this sense of togetherness with what she often felt in teaching: "Teaching is like . . . it's so strange that it's one of the most isolation-inducing professions because so much of good teaching depends on collegiality and conversations." When isolation in teaching dance is the norm, there is potency in being in community. Alone, dance educators are in danger of getting stuck—in always teaching the same way, in being flexible with school administration at the expense of their teaching values. Together, as they collectively witness each other, they can move out of being stuck.

Witnessing and listening to others provided potential for bouncing off and building on each other's ideas, and for hearing different views that expanded participants' perspectives. DTA-S and CT-K addressed this in tandem: "Can you all just come and sit on my shoulders like my whole life and just, like, remind me of all these lessons at all times?" (DTA-S) "I was thinking the same thing. I'm like, 'oh, you're all so wise.' This is so, yeah, helpful to hear your words, and not just hear your words, but feel the experience together" (CT-K). Participants found PXs reaffirming because of the shared experience, but also enriching in exposing themselves to collegial voices beyond their own self-dialogue.

MTA-B spoke to the impact in collective witnessing—both being seen/heard and seeing/hearing others. “Each time I come I feel nervous as if anything I say will be seen as strange, weird, and NOT dance teacher-ish. And then each time I come I get great ideas and discover that what I share is appreciated and even welcomed . . . I leave feeling that I have a community of like-minded people to check in with. I don’t feel so alone!”

In group improvisation, all dancers are considered valuable contributors and caretakers of the dance. There are no assigned leaders or followers; instead all dancers are concurrently leading and following (Mettler 1975). The same held true in PXs, as the following participants noted: “It feels very co-led by all of us” (DTA-S).

It’s kind of like a good potluck . . . everybody brings something good. Like everybody brings something on the plate here . . . and it’s good food, and we all get fed, you may not all eat the same thing or taste the same thing. There’s such a richness in the dialogue and the acceptance . . . of people diving in, and willingness to share that inevitably you’re going to come away with some nugget or something that’s just going to make the day better, the next couple of weeks teaching better. (CT-C)

In the collective holding of the conversation, participants learned both to step back from leading the conversation and step up to share their expertise:

As a facilitator, I realize I need to work on some things. Like letting go of feeling like I need to hold the space, or hold the conversation, or keep it going. It’s more being okay with letting things just sit. Like when you’re improvising, right? Like, just like being okay with stillness and letting things emerge naturally rather than be like *da da da da da da*.” [sings vaudeville show tune with jazz hands] (DTA-R)

“I remember coming into my first Practitioner Exchange being like, ‘I’m just gonna listen, because I have no idea what I’m doing, and I want to listen to these other people.’ And then I shared one thing and people were like, ‘Oh, that’s great!’ And I thought, ‘Oh, okay, we are all experts in this’” (DTA-H). CT-C described the sharing of roles by addressing ego: “There’s such an absence of ego here that it’s kind of awe-inspiring. There’s just no ego in the room, and just straight, just compassion and love and joy and that’s pretty amazing to be part of that.”

The togetherness brought by being seen and seeing others, being valued and valuing others, being leaders and followers simultaneously, created a sense of belonging and community for PXers, even over Zoom. They noted their trust in each other and in the experience: “I totally trust that you guys have my best interest, even though you’ve not met me” (DTA-G). “I’ve been coming back to Luna for years for exactly what we’re

already creating right here in this space and it’s like that nourishment and that juice and it’s absolute. It’s so important to me and I’m so grateful for everybody just showing up. Because that’s all we need to do, and we can trust that it’s always there” (DTA-M).

That trust supported participants in sharing their experiences, and in trying new things, and they found courage in the collective experience to challenge themselves:

Thank you for giving me the courage to kind of try things that seem really scary . . . I’m just trying, little by little, those things that maybe are a little outside my comfort zone. So thanks and I’ll be thinking of . . . each one of you tomorrow when I teach, like I feel like yay, there’s all these people and we’re doing something similar! (DTA-T)

Through collective witnessing participants discovered support and inspiration for vital change in their teaching. With play and reflection, collective witnessing arose as a thematic quality of PXs that connected and galvanized participants. These three qualities—play, reflection, and collective witnessing—are essential to the phenomenon of PXs being valuable and transformational to participants, and only emerged by viewing PXs through the framework of improvisation.

Improvisation

Improvisation is challenging to write about. Elusive and ever-evolving, it is not one thing, but many, and adopts particular qualities dependent on the practitioner’s current inquiry and impulse (Blom and Chaplin 1988; Nelson 2008). It is not limited to the characteristics of play, reflection and collective witnessing, but many improvisation practitioner-researchers point to these characteristics when speaking to improvisation’s essence (Nachmanovitch 1990; Ross 2003; Goehring 2015).

Play is at the heart of improvisation. Nachmanovitch references *lila* in discussing improvisation. An ancient Sanskrit word, it means “divine play, the play of creation, destruction, and re-creation, the folding and unfolding of the cosmos” (Nachmanovitch 1990, 1). Improvisers play when they create spontaneously, without plans (Edmund and Keller 2020). They experiment with scores, or games, to help them stay “grounded in the play of the body, to revisit the magical world of the child” (Nelson 2008) and arrive at a place of possibility, where anything can happen, but nothing particular is expected. “There are no expected ‘solutions.’ Expectations are boxes, sealed rooms; in improv we want to create hallways, open doors, gazebos, and Grand Central Stations” (Blom and Chaplin 1988, 54).

Improvisation practitioner-researchers play with opening doors and following hallways with a sense of self-reflection, in hope that they will move closer and closer to their truest self. The hallways and doors can open to infinite worlds and multiple possibilities, eliminating the myth of a sole correct path, and inspiring curiosity and play in exploring the unknown (Albright 2003; Foster 2003; Smith 2003). They invite improvisers to “chart their own paths to their interiors” (Ross 2003, 45), where, along the way they discover something new, or surprising about themselves (Banes 2003; Foster 2003). Nachmanovitch calls this the “homecoming to our true selves,” our own reflection (1990, 1).

Along with play and reflection, collective witnessing is a central element when improvising with others. As improvisers take in, or “track” their own reflection, they also practice attuning to fellow improvisers in collective witnessing (Smith and Zaporah 2013). “To clearly see that uniqueness, to see another human being . . . that ability is at the core of improvisation” (Nachmanovitch 2006). The reciprocity in seeing and being seen establishes trust in and responsibility to the collective, where each player-improviser is welcomed and valued as an essential unique contributor (Smith 2003; Goehring 2015; Łuczniak 2015), and supports individuals in courageously diving into the depths of their own selves. While improvisation cannot be contained in a single definition, practitioner-researchers affirm that play, reflection, and collective witnessing are essential characteristics of their craft.

Discussion

This article describes teachers’ experiences in PXs as playful, reflective, and collective via a framework of dance improvisation that analyzes the value of PXs to participants. The data also revealed the value of PXs *beyond* the participants, and the impact these collegial conversations had on participant teaching practices, resiliency through teaching challenges, advocacy for their students, and galvanizing the field toward systemic change.

Our capitalistic society, which includes the education system, favors linear and forward-motion progress, tangible end-goal products and permanency, formal and transactional interactions, and individualistic gains. PXs hold none of these qualities associated with White dominant cultural norms, and instead are spiralic, process-oriented, improvisatory and ephemeral, playful, casual, relational, and collective. Acknowledging the value of PXs is radical (Banes 2003).

Acknowledging the value of PXs is also essential. Dance educators need gatherings like these, where they can engage with other dance educators in a live,

embodied way, and build a collegial community that understands their needs. DTA-H speaks to this:

It’s rare for dance-specific teachers to be able to meet and talk, and to be in a PD [professional development] that’s not like, here’s some visual art, here’s some music, here’s some dance . . . [In a PX], we have a common discipline . . . I had signed up for a bunch of . . . online courses and I dropped out of all of them because there wasn’t any live interaction . . . We’re dancers! We need to see each other move and react and like, read the body language.

Other participants used language like “juiciest lifeline” (DTA-M) and “life-sustaining” (CT-C) to describe PXs and the role these conversations played in their ability to sustain in their profession. They were “nourishment and . . . so important to me” (DTA-M). They were necessary.

PXs provided essential spaces for dance educators to reflect on their practice and reconnect to their values. This became even more important during Covid teaching years when many educators found themselves in increasingly restrictive teaching environments that challenged their values. The following quotations illustrate this point.

I’m really grateful for this group because it’s really kept me grounded . . . in what’s best for the kids, what’s actually best for our bodies, what’s best for ourselves. So even though I’m hearing a lot of what my Nana would call crazy talk around me, or just foolishness, I’m just . . . really channeling Harriet Tubman right now, just that common sense of ‘Oh, you’re trying to enslave me? I’m going to run! Oh, you want to have these practices for the kids that aren’t gonna work? No!’ . . . I’m just gonna keep my convictions on what’s best for the kids and myself in terms of creativity, in terms of movement, in terms of teaching. (CT-C)

Unfortunately, [my school district] is like ‘This year is about acceleration not remediation,’ and I’m like, ‘This year is about remembering how to check in with yourself, remembering how to be in community, remembering how to do all of this.’ So I’m just going to ignore that mandate (DTA-H).

CT-C felt that she had to liberate herself, and her PX community gave her the courage to do this. Because of her continued reflective conversations in PXs, DTA-H felt so reaffirmed in her values that she was able to ignore a district mandate and focus on what her students truly needed.

While PX participants did not walk away with a top ten tip list, a sheet of best practices, or a pat answer to their questions, their active involvement launched a journey toward deeper personal change. True change happens at the level of improvisation and of PXs, where we tap into our internal, authentic, vulnerable selves.

It happens when we can fumble about with curiosity in the presence of our peers, and bounce off each other's ideas. It happens when we can integrate our reflections into our lives, and view ourselves in a new way (Foster 2003). This is the real change that will have long term impacts on our teaching, on their students, and on the field. CT-C explains this connection in her own words:

I've been to so many [district] PDs that just hurt my heart, just hurt my heart because I was like 'Really? Can I just get [this info] out of my iMac?' And so to come to a [PX] that just, I feel like I'm being developed as an individual . . . I am getting developed, this is actually real PD . . . personal development (CT-C).

Because PXs were not one-time, single-use, content-based workshops, but an ongoing conversational practice, participants didn't walk away at all, but returned to continue the collective reflection.

Conversations and connections sparked in PXs have propelled new projects, beyond the PX space, that furthered the field of dance education. The October 2020 Dance in Special Ed and Inclusion Exchange became the seed for Luna's Dance Inquiry Podcast, and provided the podcast's first guest speakers. One school district's elementary dance teachers began meeting weekly via Zoom during Covid and drew inspiration from PXs. DTA-H explained: "They became, I think, because of the Practitioner Exchanges, . . . this kind of balance of group therapy, validation . . . and resources." Several PX participants, including DTA-H, invited fellow educators from their teaching sites and organizations. This provided support to a developing site-based collegial community through a shared off-site experience, and ignited the potential for PX reflections to deepen through further conversation. DTA-M saw PXs as a model for her own teaching, and the collective environment she wanted to cultivate in her classroom: "This space is collective. And then I believe how that will impress upon us, will influence us and our classrooms. I . . . want to strive for that, you know? And I love that this is a place where I am *in* that." As a PX participant she practiced co-leadership firsthand, which gave her the confidence to advocate for it beyond PXs in her teaching.

The value of PXs lies in their playful, reflective, collective nature, which emerged because they were co-designed by the participants. PXers brought themselves and their inquiries to each circle, and the resulting unplanned and improvised conversation held them as they shared, explored, listened, responded, wondered, followed their curiosity, and experimented. "Here [in PXs] . . . this is student-led. We're saying, 'here's what we want to bring to the table'" (DTA-H). This is the work that has deep and long-term impact; this is the work dance educators are asking to do. Right now, listening to what dance educators

are really saying, and supporting them in creating collegial forums like PXs, is the most important work we as administrators, employers, and PD providers can do.

Is the essentiality of PXs unique to teaching during the particular challenges of Covid? Do PXs have the same potential for play, reflection, and collective witnessing beyond this time, or in-person, or with different groups of dance educators, facilitators, and organizers? Do spontaneous, in-passing conversations between teaching colleagues hold the same qualities? If collegial conversations were acknowledged as PD, and participants received PD credit for them, would they continue to be playful, reflective, and transformative? These are inquiries for further study.

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