



Music and Dance in Youth Peacebuilding

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18 September 2017

Music and dance can be useful means to engage youth in a dialogue for peace. Music and dance can also provide many unique insights into transforming conflicts and achieving change.

“ “As a musician who works for peace, “unity” holds less interest for me than “harmony.” Unity is when we all sing the same note. Harmony is when we sing different notes, and they are beautiful together.” ”

– David Lamotte, musician and peace activist

At the same time, as David goes on to say in his book *World Changing 101*, “Harmony is not homogeneity.” Moreover, he says, “Of course, it is also true that many notes playing together may clearly *not* be in harmony with one another. Creating that confluence takes attention, patience, and work. It is a beautiful thing when we achieve it, though. And it is not achieved by eliminating difference, but instead by finding ways to work together that are mutually nourishing, that honor and reveal each other’s gifts.” (LaMotte 2014: 113).

In these ways, artistic approaches to building peace like music and dance can offer us the means to embrace pluralism through working together to co-create

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knowledge rather than attempting to determine one 'right' way upheld by those a particular society may deem to be experts.

On Music and Peacebuilding

In the research for my first book, *Youth Peacebuilding: Music, Gender and Change* I used qualitative case comparison to explore the use of music as a tool for engaging youth in reducing and preventing violence. More specifically, the research for that book included participant observation and semi-structured interviews with young people involved in musical peacebuilding programs in Australia and Northern Ireland, providing a uniquely deep look at young people's experiences of everyday violence and how they approached peacebuilding in their local cultural contexts.

In Australia this involved a peace program in a major city engaging Indigenous, non-Indigenous, and migrant and refugee background young people in a collaborative process of music making in order to build understanding across difference, challenge racism, and create safe spaces for recovering from violence already experienced. Similarly, the program in Northern Ireland shared similar goals around addressing both racism and sectarianism in its efforts at peacebuilding through participatory music practice.

This project contributed to theoretical and practical debates and discussions around: youth political participation, the gendered landscape of conflict environments, and creative approaches to pursuing peace. In particular, I explored how music could foster peacebuilding through offering an alternative means for dialogue, helping people create and recreate identities of themselves and others, and offering a tool that could help create safe spaces for such dialogue and identity work, often in challenging circumstances.

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While my research has taken me in many directions in the decade since I began the study that underpinned that first book, I always feel drawn to return to reflections on creative approaches to peace, especially the ways they can engage youth. At present, this has taken the form of working to further analyse and share the findings from my research on dance and peacebuilding. While my earlier work dealt with dance to a degree as part of a broader range of musical practices for peacebuilding, since then I have taken up opportunities to explore dance more specifically.

Researching Dance and Peacebuilding

As Nicole Krauss writes in her latest book,

“ “More and more it seems to me...that when I write, what I am really trying to do is dance, and because it is impossible, because dancing is free of language, I am never satisfied with writing...to dance is to make oneself available (for pleasure, for an explosion, for stillness)...The abstract connections it provokes in its audience, of emotion with form, and the excitement from one’s world of feelings and imagination—all of this derives from its vanishing...But writing, whose goal is to achieve a timeless meaning, has to tell itself a lie about time; in essence, it has to believe in some form of immutability...” (Krauss 2017: 136). ”

While recognizing these challenges, I continue to find meaning in attempting to write about dance or perhaps to dance writing. As such, during my time as a McKenzie Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne I designed and embarked on a comparative study looking at the use of dance in peacebuilding programs across a range of contexts, including [Colombia](#) (now commonly deemed a post-conflict site); [the US](#) (in inner city locations in Washington, DC and Baltimore, MD where violence is commonly seen as widespread) and in

the **Philippines**, which, despite a peace agreement being signed, continues to face conflict in Mindanao.

Using ethnographically informed methods, including participant observation, interviews, and document analysis, I designed the project and methodological approach and gathered data in the US and Colombia, while a research assistant gathered the data in the Philippines case. This type of intensive data gathering, which included participating in the full global training of the trainers for the program involved, as well as months of participant observation of the programs, offered rich insights into how dance and creative movement can and does engage young people in peacebuilding across a range of diverse contexts.

While the process of writing this into a book proposal and eventually a book is ongoing, over the past several years of working on the project some key themes have started to emerge.

The role of dance in peacebuilding

How, if at all, did dance function as a useful way for youth to take part in peacebuilding? Firstly, participant statements **indicated**, “that dance can be useful in engaging youth in peacebuilding but that it must be applied in sensitive, reflexive and culturally relevant ways to appeal to and include both young men and young women.” Most if not all participants articulated one or more ways dance had been useful for peacebuilding. Some noted, for example, that dance could serve as a nonviolent means of communication and a way to connect with one’s feelings in a peace education context. Moreover, dance was seen as something that is culturally relevant and familiar, thus many youth could relate to it, and it was also something that did not require lots of expensive equipment or training. At the same time, dance was also seen as a

way to release and reduce stress, an important aspect of recovering from violence already witnessed or experienced.

Of course, participants also noted a variety of limitations to what dance could do and how, including pointing to how short term funding cycles, which are common across global peacebuilding initiatives, can at times mean short sighted programs. They also noted that without attention to access and inclusion, efforts to engage youth in dance and creative movement for peacebuilding might overlook the needs of people with disability or people who speak a different language from the one deployed in the dance programs. Still these limitations are not inherent to dance or always present, as seen by the work of [VisAbility](#) in Sri Lanka, a country recovering from conflict and where dance programming has been used to engage people with and without disabilities in coordination with a rights empowerment initiative.

Conclusion

Overall, it appears music and dance, when applied in thoughtful ways, can help foster peacebuilding. This is not to say they may not also be used ineffectively or to create exclusions, but when used appropriately they can have much to offer. As one facilitator in programs using dance and creative movement for peacebuilding the Washington, DC and Baltimore programs said when speaking about stepping out of one's comfort zone to engage within a group:

“ “When one person takes a positive risk, it shows the rest of us that we can take a positive risk and encourages us to do that also. So hopefully, after a while they will be able to see that if they can just do one thing that makes them uncomfortable or kind of step outside their comfort zone that it actually helps other people to do the same and get the most out of the experience.” ”

Surely such steps can be a useful means for reflecting on ways of finding harmony in the dissonance of conflict.

Author’s Note: *The research assistant involved with the Philippines work, Erica Rose Jeffrey is a fantastic scholar and dance practitioner in her own right and will soon be awarded her PhD for her own practice-led research in Fiji and the Philippines. More on her work can be found at: <http://peacemoves.org>*

Image credit: Hernan Pinera/Flickr.

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