

Designing a senior secondary dance programme

Designing a senior secondary dance programme at Rosehill College.

Rosehill College is a large (over 1770 students) co-educational state school in Papakura.

Context

As a teacher in a co-ed, urban-rural school in south Auckland the first thing I think about when designing a dance programme is our location. The school draws students from Karaka and Drury, the more rural areas of South Auckland, as well as a significant urban community from Papakura. The makeup of our student population is a big factor in the way we balance our programme to meet the needs of our students.

The 2010 curriculum and standards alignment planning phase gave us the opportunity to make the changes that we needed to make, provided time to rethink the way we assessed, and also the progression of our learning and assessment programmes from level 6 to level 8.

The school places a lot of emphasis on and pressure on student achievement through the attainment of achievement standards credits – making learning courses achievable and valuable. The design of the programme is really responsive to that in relation to the types of learners my students are and what they as young people value in their world. We have a high success rate, as defined by student success in achievement standards.

The other agenda in terms of valued learning outcomes are about our students being change agents and purposeful participants in social discourse.

How does this programme fit into the 3 year progression in this arts subject?

We have two senior level dance classes: a standalone year 11/level 6 course and a combined year 12/level 7 and year 13/level 8 class. A clear foundation is set at level 6 to accelerate students' understanding of the fundamental dance vocabulary, practices, and processes.

At level 6 students come in from a range of dance experience:

- No experience at year 9 and 10.
- Have danced in NZAMD or similar syllabi in private studios, outside of school.
- Have done year 9 and year 10 at Rosehill College and so have a really good curriculum-based, creative foundation in terms of that understanding of "what dance is", but haven't always got the technical performance ability.

So the programme has to be responsive to all of the different levels of student capability, and prior knowledge, and experience.

Transition points

The different year levels are structured around the four strands of learning with an increased level of complexity, technical fluency, conceptual, and creative understanding.

Our year 10 course is really structured on readiness for senior secondary and readiness for senior curriculum levels and so students will have units which target specifically choreographic skills, introducing them to dance vocabulary that we place huge importance on at level one. They also look at performance, and so they get exposure to some basic, easily accessible genres that they need to perform and reproduce movement in, and the dance analysis aspects of the course.

The transition to level 7 is complicated by having a mixed level class of year 12 and 13s. There is an adjustment phase, often a period of disengagement or reluctance or lack of motivation. We re-engaged in vocabulary, pairing the level 8 up with other level 8 students, pairing the level 7s up with other level 7 students, getting them to go through a process of exploring some of the known, the generic vocabulary in pairs, creating little pieces that just show that they know what they are doing. Later we pair the level 7 with level 8 students.

Example of a choreographic programme

Level 6: three small briefs (a solo, duet, and group composition) using introductory stimuli material.

- Based on geometric shapes and the objects or feelings or connotations/connection geometric shapes have (solo)
- Based on kowhaiwhai design (duets)
- Based on Escher art works (group)

Level 7: A full group collaboration based on the imagery and feelings evoked from some famous Haiku poetry and a full solo project developed based on their sense of identity as young people and a youth issue that matters to them.

Level 8: A duet collaboration derived from a study of the work of Lady Gaga and her charitable organisation, aimed at ending discrimination and hate-crime and fostering global youth empowerment; AND a production of a full conceptual work developed in consultation with history students, based on historical and socially applicable peace and protest movements.

How does the programme connect to the school's priorities?

For the last few years there has been a strong emphasis across the school and curriculum to enable ('guarantee') student achievement through the attainment of a certain number of credits. So there has been an expectation that the structure and programme designs were reconsidered to enable these outcomes.

How does this programme contribute to raising student achievement?

The students most at risk of underachievement at this school are boys and Māori and Pasifika students. I intentionally make decisions focused on fostering the boys' enjoyment of dance that enable them to find ways into the subject, so they can see themselves reflected in the work. There is lots of choice built into the selection of content that is formed around large themes such as youth culture and things that are relevant or meaningful to them in their lives outside the classroom.

For Māori, I make explicit decisions around the context for learning that is aimed at engaging and enabling

them to share their knowledge and kaupapa, their upbringing, and their past experiences. Those things that they bring into the class are going to be inherently valued and valuable to their learning in class.

Conditions for learning

How flexible are the learning opportunities?

There are four key strategies I use to ensure student success.

Co constructed learning outcomes

In my planning I am explicit about learning outcomes, and particularly what I expect students to be up to when leading towards an assessment.

The major lesson objectives will then be broken up in to series of stem activities that provoke the students into developing material relevant to that section of the unit of work. All of the different tasks and learning possibilities are made visible for the groups or individuals or pairs etc to complete at their own pace. As a class, we will decide what is most relevant and how many of the activities are reasonable to have completed by the end of the lesson.

Differentiating the students in the class.

I do quite a bit of research on students' capabilities (that they bring in to the class) such as relevant skills and learning generated in different subjects, and prior knowledge etc. I use this information to strategically group students (or not) for particular tasks or units that are responsive to particular learning needs.

Diverse learning tools

I use of a range learning tools to communicate and deliver the programme. For example Learning Management System Ultranet, Facebook groups, music editing software and other ICTs to specifically benefit and engage dance students.

Collaboration and choice

Essentially this is about providing as many opportunities as possible within lessons and units of work for students to experience real Ako, working cooperatively with a range of choices that they can make for themselves.

Differentiation and collaboration are key strategies for me. Finding ways for choice to come through, and what they choose to create dance about. An example at level 7, when they do a solo unit, the theme is *Matters To Me*, a broad concept providing quite a range of choice within the context. It's about them choosing something that is of significance or of impact to youth today, and something they feel they have experience in, and dancing about that – validating their own experiences and identities.

I have had students that have had to deal with domestic violence. So the authenticity of their own experience in those things that matter to them, translates hugely into the authenticity of what they then dance about.

How culturally responsive is the programme?

I try and achieve this through differentiated approaches. For example I consider ways for Māori students to experiment with and explore within the learning context, themes, ideas and content which is uniquely Māori. A recent example of this is in a choreographic unit I have developed around the theme of peace and protest through movements from history.

Students have researched the Parihaka land wars and Te Whiti o Rongomai, his passive resistance movement . Some students already have an understanding or a prior knowledge generated from learning in other subject from previous year levels, or they have whānau who have stories or knowledge that they can recall.

My training and experience in the Te Kotahitanga project and the three years of observation, critique and shadow coaching cycles has had the biggest impact on my teaching and learning practice. The principles of the effective teaching profile became really influential in terms of the way I interact with my students and the way that I think about the importance of what I am planning for, or teaching them.

Being culturally responsive, is about providing the right learning conditions and environment for the students and that is derived from a foundation of Manaakitanga; modelling and exemplifying the idea of Mana Motuhake, which is striving for high expectations in both behaviour and achievement. These two values then combine really effectively to foster Ako and the ability for them to share, co-construct, and work at tasks together without me needing to really be involved at all, at times.

From the beginning I promote the idea that all students in my class have a responsibility to self and are accountable to the others in the class. Equally, they know they have a responsibility to the others and are accountable to themselves, which hopefully creates a sense of individual agency but with and for the collective in terms of learning outcomes.

There are three key branches of cultural responsiveness that are essential to my practice to make sure that success occurs.

- Making sure that in those first few weeks of the year, that they trust my role in supporting them to achieve success. They will know that I am going to push them and expect a lot from them.
- Getting to know my students as young people, and individuals, at the start of the year. Who they are as people; what they have done in the past etc. Later in the year it's getting to know what they do outside of the class that is important to them.
- Fostering kotahitanga or togetherness in the class is important and is enabled through the concept of ako, making sure that all of them can see a way to learn from everyone else. They build the confidence to lead each other and respect the skills that everyone else in the class has.

What are the assessment opportunities?

The main assessment opportunities drop out of four strands and relate to the big ideas within dance such as transformation, empowering and challenge and invention.

The strands are:

- The choreographic achievement standards, which provide opportunities for students to learn and

demonstrate invention and creating, and at the higher levels, transforming the viewers' thinking.

- The performing dance, which is more located around performing accurate, clear and controlled movements, and the notion of embodiment and really communicating and performing externally.
- Dance analysis and giving students opportunities to view dance widely.
- The learning focus in the development of dance practices, which includes choreographic process, knowledge of the elements of dance, and the way that they work in and around dance creation and performing.

The context for learning for each unit or body of work in class will have aspects of all of the assessment branches in each one of them. It's about identifying what learning opportunities are most relevant, and give students a choice in the assessment in terms of the achievement standard. We consider which one they are most strongly able to be assessed in for this particular unit of work. Alternatively, I will select what is the dominant standard that is most relevant and aligned to this context for learning.

What evidence do you use to monitor effectiveness of the programme?

Student voice has become a dominant source of feedback and reflection for me and that's part of developing and maintaining the reciprocal trust in the learning partnership. There are lots of different ways that I get that information from them.

In most lessons I get the students to articulate what they have achieved in relation to the lesson activity and what the expected learning outcome was. They might produce the feedback through writing in a reflective journal or note it down on their iPhone. We use Facebook as a space for discussion and feedback. It supports the trust relationship and goes back to the notion of being both responsible and accountable to the group and ourselves.

I use assessment data, from both within class learning and achievement data from other classes that I consider has natural and relevant connections to dance. For example, the sociocultural understandings and skill developed in social sciences and English are really valuable learning skills and knowledge and are aligned well to the learning demands in dance.

Content

How does the content relate to your students' world?

I try and make sure that all the work we do in dance has a purposeful social connection or a notion of change/challenge in the intention behind it, so that students feel that there is an intentional and valued message being communicated; they know the message behind what they are trying to communicate and what they are dancing about.

'Shift' is one of the main contexts for all our work, particularly social shift, around the concepts of resistance, change, and challenges against social norms. The focus is on empowering minorities and enabling productive change.

The idea behind this is that the learning has value for them as young people and learners beyond the context of dance, once they leave school.

How does the content connect to students learning in other subjects?

The history students are going to collaborate with my level 8 dance students. This year, instead of looking at global rituals and ceremonies, we are going to look at historical peace and protest movements and create dances based on what the catalyst was for that protest movement to occur, and on what the outcome was of the historical event.

The dance and history students will work collaboratively around the generation of source material (through research) and the development of a dance performance in response to the source material.

We are exploring options around assessment so that students in both curriculum areas generate credits for the work. Ideally the student will be able to use common assessment across the two curriculum areas.

What student data do you use to inform planning?

I look at relevant achievement standards from the previous year. So it might be one writing standard from English, to see where the students writing skills are at. I then see if they have done dance before, to see their choreography and performance level. I really like to look at social studies and history because of the common emphasis on social cultural connections.

This information or data informs me about decisions for programme design and student groupings. When it comes to group choreography I can look at the previous standards that they have done and gauge what students are in a really good position to tackle the standard, and group them together. They stand a better chance of getting that higher level of excellence work by bouncing off one another. This frees me up to work with those who I have identified as more high need, to scaffold them more through the tasks.

How are the key competencies (NZC) embedded into what is valued learning?

The key competencies are fundamental in all dance work - relating to others, managing self - are important in terms of the culture of the learning environment and in terms of enabling the students to achieve. From the beginning of level 1 (and the junior programme) 'managing self' and taking the risk to be honest are essential for learning dance, and are reflected in the decisions about the culture of learning. This is targeted in every lesson, and explicitly discussed at the beginning at the beginning of a unit of work.