



PERCEPTIONS



Expressing Migration
Through Dance



Location

Swansea City of Sanctuary's 'Home Away from Home' Exhibition, Grand Multicultural Hub, Swansea (21st March – 7th April 2022)



Contributors

Swansea University, Aissatou Diop, Swansea Grand Theatre



Audience

This activity involved over 250 children aged 8-11 from 4 schools, Hafod Primary School, Ysgol Gyfun Gwyr, Parkland Primary School and St Joseph's Cathedral Primary School. The outputs of the activity will also be shared online with the general public and will also be available to other users, including first-line practitioners, CSOs and migrant organisations.



Purpose/Aim

The workshop aimed to create an innovative and interactive way for participants to explore migration themes and express them through physical movements without using language. The workshop aimed to re-shape participant opinions on migration by presenting a new avenue for them to interact and empathise with an individual migrant's journey – de-homogenising the reductive stereotypes and promoting positive perceptions of migrants. The workshop encouraged participants to empathise through kinaesthetic empathy (Reason & Reynolds, 2010), linking physical movements to the emotions experienced through the practitioner's migration journey (Sawada, Suda & Ishi, 2003).



Description of the Activity

The activity centred around the migration story of the creative practitioner, African dancer, Aissatou Diop. It included telling Aissatou's story to the participants and exploring themes that coincide with those emerging from the migrant interviews in the PERCEPTIONS project (i.e. loss, disorientation, faith, community and hope). Participants then learned dance movements and collaboratively improvised the ways of expressing these ideas through movement.





Techniques

The activity progresses in 4 stages

Stage 1. Physical and Intellectual Warm-up:

Physical: The practitioner first conducted warm-up exercises to prepare the participants for physical movement and avoid injury to prepare for the physical activity.

Intellectual: The practitioner asked the participants about their native country and their existing knowledge of migrants and migration – obtaining background knowledge on the participants and establishing knowledge benchmarks. Then the practitioner explained how art and music operate to explore migration themes and encouraged participants to think about migration themes and their existing knowledge in the context of art.

Stage 2. Storytelling: The practitioner shared facts and information about recent migration to Europe, which are at the centre of the PERCEPTIONS project, mainly focussing on feelings and emotional responses that are difficult to express in language. Further explanations highlighted how dance has the power of the present to disrupt, disclose and expose existing stereotypes about migration.

Stage 3. Linking Dance Movements to Migration:

The practitioner linked specific dance movements to the main themes in the PERCEPTIONS migrant interviews and her own story of migration, e.g. fear, hope and uncertainty. She invited participants to experiment together and explore different arrangements of these choreographed bodily movements in space, which can best reflect some of the PERCEPTIONS themes. She was trying not to depict any concrete experiences of migration and perceptions it creates but instead focus on alternative, potential migratory spaces emerging in dance. The intention was to teach participants that in dance, there is an absence of shame and an absence of a preconditioned judgement about migration which can be explored through group dancing.

Stage 4. Exploring dance together:

Through choreographed dance moves, the group collectively explored migration themes without the use of language and expressed their feelings through dance, creating a space for alternative politics of perception and expression. By mimicking the dance moves of the practitioner, the participants explored their empathetic imaginaries of migration. At the same time, through the process of mimicking, the participants represented the uncertainty of migration through their inability to channel the intended meanings behind the practitioner's choreography.



Key Concepts

Dance as movement and expression of migration:

Dance is transitory – it emerges in a moment the performer is disorientated from their location, themselves and other pressures, only to explore movement in place (Deleuze, 1998, 65). This disorientating nature of dance makes it a perfect medium to express the similarly disorientating process of migration, a theme found continuously throughout the PERCEPTIONS migrant interviews. Dance speaks to the ideal choreographed movement and *migration* through time and space as displayed by the creator/practitioner. It can never be fully emulated by the mimicking participants, showing the disorientation and uncertainty of migration (Scolieri, 2008, 15). Emotions, such as disorientation, can be expressed by dancers through their physical movements, due to them being cognitively or perceivably linked (Van Dyck, Burger, & Orlandatou, 2017 & Sawada, Suda & Ishii, 2003). Dance helps migrants to both remember and forget their pasts, using an emotional connection to choreograph their dance and share their stories with others. It creates an alternative identity citation, which goes beyond language and escapes existing migration stereotypes (Scolieri, 2008, 15). However, dance is just expression, so the meaning attached to each movement cannot be captured, communicated and produces unintended outcomes.

Kinaesthetic Empathy & Sympathy with migrants:

According to Reason & Reynolds (2010), Kinaesthetic Empathy can be created through an embodied or imagined connection between the viewer and the dancer through methods like inner mimicry or imagined substitution. Kinaesthetic *Sympathy* relates to viewers' cognitive and reflective responses, such as admiration or the projection of emotions onto their movements (Reason & Reynolds, 2010). During the dance workshops, the practitioner (Aissatou) believes that dance helped amplify the emotional connection that participants (children) developed with the migrant stories. She argues that dance increases the intensity of response through direct participation: "I can feel it on their face, they were very sad, the way I was explaining it, I can feel it, I can see it – the way they were asking questions... if I just showed them... it wouldn't be the same." Thinking through the body helped participants re-evaluate and re-imagine perceptions of migration: "At the end, I was asking them - when I was doing this dance, this step, what was the meaning? And you can see they say, *oh it's when you were travelling or when you were on the plane, it's when you were sad – sitting outside crying, it's when you were pregnant. So they understand quickly... more than when I talk face-to-face to them.*"



Outcomes

Outcomes of this activity included a collection of images and videos of the practitioner and participants conducting the workshops. These have been shared online with the general public as teaching materials, demonstrating how key migration-related themes can be re-interpreted in dance (See QR Code). The participants empathetically and physically interacted with migration themes with 91% of participants expressing their enjoyment of the workshop in their feedback forms and 86% agreed that their knowledge of migration improved after the workshop.



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Impact

This activity brought together a migrant, their story and children from various economic, social and cultural backgrounds (particularly children living in areas of social deprivation and from hard-to-reach groups). The workshop is highly reproducible, only requiring an open, flat space, a template for retelling the migration story and a related activity animated by the practitioner. The workshop's success draws both on the practitioner's skills (as a trained dancer) and participatory techniques, which help recreate migration stories together with the participants (children) and highlight migration-related themes that are considered important.

Based on the feedback completed by workshop participants, the workshop improved their empathy towards migrants, created an accessible learning environment and provided compelling learning opportunities for participating children with 77% of participants believing that this workshop assisted their understanding of migrant experiences. Tews, Michel and Noe (2017) suggest that enjoyment of the informal learning activity can have a positive effect on the learning process, which can be shown through over 50% of children expressing their enjoyment of this specific workshop and 86% believing they gained a deeper understanding of migrant's experiences.

The workshops broadened the range and appeal of learning opportunities, enabling participants to learn a form of African dance that they were not exposed to before. The workshops also gave a voice and platform for migrants to share their experiences with young people, focusing on changing attitudes to migrants and providing equal opportunities to younger people to learn about people seeking sanctuary in the UK.

As part of the project's civic mission, the workshops helped increase capacity for tolerance, changed perceptions and helped align to shared project outcomes for local people, organisations, such as Swansea City of Sanctuary and wider-policy priorities.





PERCEPTIONS



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