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3DD042: Dissertation

**Living in the moment: An analysis of how Csikszentmihalyi’s Flow State can be achieved throughout the holistic experience of dance for people living with dementia.**

**Abstract:**

It has been recognised by Pia Kontos (2018) that dance activates and increases important aspect of the lives of those living with dementia. Social interactions, physical health and mobility, creativity, cognitive abilities and the need for purpose, are all positive aspects that dance offers to people living with dementia. This dissertation examines Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of ‘flow’ and how this, combined with the holistic elements of dance, can offer alternative means of experiencing the world for people living with dementia, with specific reference to the Moving Minds Project at York St John University. The holistic approaches this dissertation examines are the effects of music and movement together and separately, the inter-subjectivity and relationships formed and grown within the group dynamic, and the general increase of positive wellbeing during and after the session. This essay therefore interrogates how a ‘flow state’ is created through these holistic experiences. As is now well established, a characteristic symptom of dementia is that it forces a person to live in the ‘present moment’. Given its focus on present experience, it will therefore be argued that the ‘flow state’, and by extension The Moving Minds Project, is a potentially effective way of allowing people with dementia to meaningfully experience the world.

**Dementia and The Arts**

There has been a growing interest in person-centred, wellbeing approaches, taking the form of creative, arts-based interventions, such as community dance, for people with dementia. Dementia continually attacks the brain causing it to eventually weigh one hundred and forty grams less than a healthy brain (Alzheimer’s UK Research, 2018). Though they can differ person to person, the fundamental symptoms of dementia are memory loss, difficulty concentrating, confusion over simple tasks, communication problems and vast mood changes. As such, people with dementia are forced to live in the moment that they are currently in. “When one engages with a person living with dementia, one meets a person living in that precise moment” (Lee and Adams, 2011:110) is how occupational therapist Hilary Lee describes encounters with people living with dementia. It is then vital that this moment is accepted and nurtured to allow people with dementia to have meaningful experiences.

In light of this understanding of how people with dementia experience the world, scientific research appears to confirm the benefits of community dance projects such as, Moving Minds. Scientist Rachel Lee from the Department of Psychological Medicine at the University of Singapore argues that “Non-pharmacological approaches for older adults in the MCI stage, could offer opportunities in preventing/delaying cognitive decline or developing dementia” (Lee, 2019). Though clear that the therapeutic attributes of community dance projects are not a form of therapy, there are numerous non-pharmacological approaches with demonstrative benefits. One example is Cognitive Stimulation Therapy (CST) which involves participating in group activities designed to improve memory, problem-solving skills and language ability (MODEM, 2016). Additionally, Cognitive Rehabilitation Therapy (CRT) works by individualising treatment based on the patients’ neuropsychological pattern to stimulate the damaged areas (Talassi, 2007). Finally, reminiscence work involves conversation stimulated by photographs, possessions and music. Though mundane conversation is not a form of therapy, giving people with dementia the opportunity to socialise is vital in ensuring they remain part of society despite their decline in cognitive abilities.

Recognition of the potential link between community dance projects and the wellbeing of people living with dementia inspired dance practitioner Elaine Harvey to set up the Moving Minds Project at York St John University as a weekly creative movement session for people living with dementia and their families. The Project moulds itself around people with dementia by accepting the way the disease affects the participants, seeing them as people rather than people with dementia. Though predominantly based on movement, there are numerous elements involved within the Project that interlink to create a full sensory, holistic experience. When a disease is incurable, it is important to treat the quality of life of that person rather than the illness. Spending time with others, being creatively involved in a project and having fun, are all ways in which people living with dementia can be reassured that they are still a valued member of society. In an interview with the participants of the Moving Minds Project, one said that it made them “feel happy to be doing something with other people” (Moving Minds, Participant Y, 2019) and they kept coming back because it felt “worthwhile” (Moving Minds, Participant Y, 2019). They also said that they enjoyed “meeting different people and moving around rather than just sitting” (Moving Minds, Participant Y, 2019). The opinions of the participants are invaluable in demonstrating that community dance, and its holistic nature, is a worthwhile investment for those who are affected by dementia.

This essay will, therefore, attempt to reinforce the already recognised benefits of the holistic elements of creative dance by looking to Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘flow state’ to provide an in-depth analysis of how dance can create an intense sensory experience of the present moment. The Moving Minds Project will form the lens of analysis by demonstrating the contentment and joy dance can bring to those with dementia, who inevitably live in the present moment.

**A ‘Flow State’ and Phenomenology**

‘Flow’ is a concept created by psychologist Csikszentmihalyi and is described as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). The idea of a ‘flow state’ suggests that we are capable of being fully immersed in something that we are doing to the point in which we no longer think of anything else. It’s a state in which the past and future are both irrelevant. Examining the ‘flow state’ alongside phenomenology demonstrates why dance can be such an effective strategy to help people living with dementia. As well as aid their experiences, it can also provide peace and comfort for their mentality as “flow will examine the process of achieving happiness through control over one’s inner life” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013: 6).

Phenomenology is the study of experience and suggests that the way in which we experience the world is through our whole selves, meaning our senses, body and mind intertwine to create our experiences. Philosopher Robert Sokolowski in his book *Phenomenology of the Human Person* argues that “all our external senses form part of a single perceptual system (…) with the “common” sensibility as the root for all the five senses and the source for memory and imagination” (Sokolowski, 2008**:** 198). By simultaneously activating numerous senses, dance therefore enables an intense phenomenological experience at a particular moment. Activated senses allow connections to the most central part of ourselves to be reached. Dance, by its capacity to meet the specific sensory and cognitive needs of those living with dementia, therefore acts as a phenomenological experience enabling them to access the experiences which constitute the self. It is therefore vital to allowing them to continue to fully participate in society regardless of their condition, not in spite of it.

The Moving Minds Project demonstrates the benefits dance can offer those living with dementia by the almost constant focus on the mind and body relationship. For example, a breathing exercise practiced in the sessions invites participants to close their eyes and move their arms in relation to their breath. The exercise is designed to allow the participants’ time to turn their attention inwards and develop an understanding for the person as a whole experience. As the first exercise of the session, it is important that attention is drawn towards how we feel in that moment in order to be fully present in ourselves. Both mind and body are active during the sessions and dance is simultaneously experienced physically and emotionally. The Moving Minds Project is about this connection between the mind and the body. It allows the participants with dementia every opportunity to relish in the dance by creating an experience in which the participants are completely immersed in the doing and the being.

Throughout the remainder of this essay, we will continue to explore the extent of the benefits community dance projects can offer those living with dementia by exploring the various aspects of the Moving Minds Project.

**The ‘Flow’ of Movement**

Phenomenology recognises that dance is a form of physical expression which allows the mover to connect with themselves. The experience of dementia is often characterised by a deterioration of self-awareness and control. Creative movement therefore allows those with dementia to regain some autonomy and sense of selfhood. Thus, Moving Minds emphasises improvised and small personal dances allowing each participant to move in their own way to allow for a ‘flow state’ to immerge. The Moving Minds Project uses dance as a creative medium for non-verbal expression. Dance is encouraged as the primary response to music, props and emotions, though verbal expression is present throughout such as talking and singing. Dr Richard Coaten in his article ‘Embodiment and dementia- Dance/movement Psychotherapists respond’ argues that “dance is vitally important for people with diminishing cognitive powers” (Coaten, 2013:2). He further argues that dance enables people with declining mental processes to move in a way in which is accessible to them as an individual, but also, is still recognised and encouraged as dance. Moving Minds adheres to Coaten’s concept that dance is for everyone.

Mirroring is a particularly important technique that can be used to explore dances capacity for enhancing a sense of self and self-awareness. By mirroring other participants, those with dementia have to develop a sense of empathy within that moment, and in doing so, inevitably have to have a meaningful sense of self, that being their place as an individual within a larger group. Mirroring is therefore a vital movement composition in the Moving Minds Project. It consists of two people facing one another and copying each other’s movements, as if there was a mirror in front of them. For example, the sessions begin seated in chairs that are placed in a circle allowing everyone in the group to see one another. The facilitators spread themselves amongst the circle, so all the participants have a clear view of a facilitator. This allows collaborative mirroring to take place, with participants being invited to connect with their bodies. It begins by using physical contact to touch different body parts. Due to mobility differences, not all participants have the same range of movement, therefore, facilitators must recognise this and adapt their movements to allow the participants to feel comfortable with what they can physically do. For example, if a participant struggles to reach their shoulder, a facilitator may begin to touch their arm instead to reassure that this is perfectly fine to do so for the exercise. This creates empathy which is the ability to understand another's feelings and is described as “coming in contact with, on a visual and kinaesthetic level, that which another is experiencing” (Innes and Hatfield, 2001:52) by Dr Athena Innes in her book *Healing Arts Therapies and Person- Centred Dementia* Care. Her book emphasizes the importance of putting the individual before the illness to provide holistic person-centred support for people with dementia. It is important for people living with dementia to receive empathy and help to create relationships based on equality and common understanding, rather than power and dependency.

The movement created by the participants is improvised and spontaneous, therefore, there is opportunity to become fully and emotionally immersed in the physicality. This is the point at which the ‘flow state’ can be achieved. The Project’s focus on improvisation allows each participant to respond physically however they decide, thus, making the dance inclusive and wholly accessible. An example of the participants spontaneously physically responding is an activity called ‘Stomp and Clamp’. This involves an upbeat piece of music being played and the participants being encouraged to clap their hands and stomp their feet as a response to what they hear. This activity usually begins by the participants copying a facilitator, then a participant leading, then ending with a freestyle section in which all move as they see fit. As such, the participants can achieve a state of ecstatic dance – described by Jaques Rook as “a free-form style of dance inspired by music, allowing the body of the dancer to move freely without judgment or concern for the refinement” (Rooke, 2014). It can therefore be argued that, through this ecstatic dance, a ‘flow state’ is achieved, allowing the participants to find some personal meaning in that present moment.

**Musical Memory**

In relation to people with dementia specifically, music is of particular significance for phenomenological experience. Given musical memory is typically one of the last parts of the brain to be affected by the disease, it generally forms a gateway to formative experiences. This gateway thereby forms an opportunity for the ‘flow state’ to exist, as the individual immerses themselves in the memories they associate with that piece of music. As dance researcher Karen Bond argues that “music can provide a familiar acoustic environment and distract attention from feelings of fear, act as a cue for relaxation, and become a masking agent for unpleasant distracting sounds from the outside” (Nwankpa U., Bevill S. (2019), cited by Bond (2019)). Similarly, University of Nottingham’s mental health researcher Becky Dawson argues “music’s potential to support and strengthen relationships, provide “in the moment” experiences, and meet the psychosocial needs of people with dementia” (Dawson, 2019) in her recent article looking at the impact of music on the health and wellbeing for people with dementia. She further argues that music helps form the basis of an improved quality of life, not just for people with dementia but also their families and carers. Music thereby enables those with dementia to connect with important emotional experiences whilst remaining in the present moment.

A key purpose of music in the Moving Minds Project is to stimulate emotional responses. Music with positive lyrics and upbeat melodies, familiar to the participants, are used to create a positive mood and act as an emotion trigger within the session. For example, ‘Get Happy’ by Judy Garland and 'You’ll Never Walk Alone’ by Gerry and The Pacemakers are regularly used. The Moving Minds sessions have specific activities that revolve around singing as a response to music. Singing can be as effective as listening to music for achieving Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘flow state’, as it allows musical memory to be revealed and experienced in the present moment. When these songs are accessed and sung as a group, the participants are completely immersed. The aim is to trigger positive memories as much as possible, however, it is nonetheless important that we allow participants to experience all emotions that may be triggered within the session, in order to fully connect with their whole selves.

As well as providing a gateway to previous formative experiences, by being a stimulus for creativity, music can enable those with dementia to continue to develop their personalities within the present moment. Dance artist Miranda Tufnell in her book *Dance Health and Wellbeing* argues that “music helps to transform a simple gesture or movement into a richer creative expression” (Tufnell, 2010: 40). The first activity in Moving Minds is called ‘Movement Signatures’, in which the participants take turns to dance with an object to a piece of music as a physical introduction of themselves to the group. The most frequent piece of music used in this activity is the orchestral piece called ‘Carmen’. The dramatic song is a useful stimulus for this creative improvisation as it prompts the participants to expand their movements into something more extraordinary to fit the piece of music. This allows participants chance to express their personalities. As each individual's interpretation of the ‘extraordinary’ is essentially different, each participant, despite being people whose experience of dementia has largely robbed them of their personality, is able to express themselves as an individual.

The Moving Minds Project therefore demonstrates the importance of music, combined with creative movement, for those living with dementia as “it facilitates social interaction, helps to maintain relationships, reinforces their sense of identity, remains meaningful and accessible through all stages of dementia, and that overall it supports the wellbeing of both people with dementia and those involved in their care” (Dawson, 2019).

**The Importance of Relationships**

As the theory of ‘flow’ is being treated in this essay, it is important to understand that ‘flow’ occurs independently of others. As described by Csikszentmihalyi himself, “Flow occurs within the privacy of a person’s consciousness” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: 10). Nevertheless, is it important to recognise that the degree of mindfulness necessary to achieve a state of ‘flow’ requires an individual to be completely comfortable within their environment. Relationships are inevitably an inherent part of the positive environment required. For this reason, dance and musicality within a group setting, such as the Moving Minds Project, is a particularly effective means of enabling those with dementia to have meaningful experiences.

Positive relationships are of particular importance for people living with dementia due to its effects. People living with dementia have a strong risk of loneliness as it isolates people within their own minds and from society, as everything becomes unfamiliar and they can be treated as incapable. Indeed, Kontos argues that “persons living with dementia are […] presumed to be unable to make meaningful contributions to their own lives and the lives of others” (Kontos, 2018). The dependence dementia creates can cause a loss of contact with friends and loss of a constant stream of small interactions incorporated within daily activities. The Alzheimer’s Society argues that “people living with dementia have poor experiences when coming into contact with people outside their immediate social circle. This can make them want to withdraw from society” (Alzheimer's UK, 2018). In the Project, every participant is linked by dementia which allows for meaningful contributions to take place in either empathy, advice or friendships built on common experiences.

Community arts projects like Moving Minds create an opportunity for socialising and interaction to help combat this loneliness. The Moving Minds Project has a huge sense of togetherness. Togetherness is about connecting with groups of people on both a physical and emotional level. It’s about experiencing something simultaneously with others. A predominant feature of Moving Minds is the emphasis on physical contact, usually either hand in hand or the sharing of a prop. Physical contact helps to create trust and support between both the participants together and between the participants and the facilitators. It can remove divides between the group and can create opportunity for both physical and emotional connections to be made. Furthermore, the connections with others in the community who either have dementia or are also loved ones and carers for someone who does creates the opportunity for people to meet others who are in the same situation as them and can share experiences, advice and ideas. Observation of other members in the group can lead to recognition of similar traits, such as the way in which someone else who also has dementia loves to sing. As relationships are built and nurtured throughout projects like Moving Minds, participants gain confidence with one another and personal recognition and trust are created. It can therefore be argued that the more relaxed and at ease participants are throughout the session, the more comfortable they become and therefore the more likely are to achieve the mindfulness necessary for a ‘flow state’ to be achieved.

Moreover, observations of participants’ behaviour would suggest the benefits of the Moving Minds Project go further in enabling a ‘flow state’ to be achieved. Dementia diminishes individual's ability to communicate, often having a detrimental impact on their relationships with loved ones. Kontos and Alisa Grigorovich in their article *‘*Integrating Citizenship, Embodiment, and Relationality: Towards a Reconceptualization of Dance and Dementia in Long-Term Care’ argue that movement eliminates a person’s struggle to communicate. This is due to their “non-verbal communications being read, understood, verified and acted upon” (Kontos and Martin, 2013:5). The reason the project is successful in rebuilding these relationships is because it enables alternative means of communicating to speech, this is referred to as embodied communication. Embodied communication is a form of communication that uses the body as a whole rather than just speech alone. This allows a person living with dementia to feel recognised, understood and met by others on an embodied level. One participant of Moving Minds has their Son, join them in the sessions. When asked what he enjoys most about seeing his Mother participate in the session, he said “I love it when she sings and we can sing together” (Moving Minds, Participant S, 2019). As these two participants sing together, they are both living and experiencing the same moment simultaneously. This connection can enable their relationship to flourish as they both live in a moment together. Therefore, the Project opens up alternative methods of communication through creative movement and music which can enable a reconnection. The sense of emotional wellbeing and comfort that can be created by this can allow participants to better achieve a ‘flow state’.

Given the sometimes patronising treatment those living with dementia can experience outside of the Project, the relationships they have with the facilitators are of vital importance to enabling them to have feelings of autonomy and self-worth. In Moving Minds, the facilitators are equals to participants. This is demonstrated in partner work, where facilitators always partner with a participant to prevent divides between participant and facilitator. The equality within the Project enables participants to have huge impact on the content of the session by responding to activities and making contributions, such as song suggestions, anecdotes or movements, that are then woven into activities. This allows participants to feel in control, seen and present within the group. They are actively engaging in the Project, rather than passively receiving it. It is these multiple ways of rebuilding a sense of self that arguably makes the Project effective in ensuring those with dementia can reach a ‘flow state’.

**Dementia, ‘Flow’ and the Future**

Though there is not significant evidence and research to prove that the holistic elements of a creative dance session are able to mitigate the effects of the disease, this analysis argues the ways in which Moving Minds can work as a medium in providing the opportunity to reach a ‘flow state’ for someone living with dementia. It advocates how music and memory activated through dance works to mitigate the effects of identity loss. It argues how for people with dementia, having diverse and meaningful relationships is important for their wellbeing and quality of life. Therefore, this ‘flow state’ allows that person the time and opportunity to invest themselves in an activity or a feeling in which only the moment they are living in matters. As argued by Csikszentmihalyi himself, “because flow produces harmony within the self, attention can be invested totally in the activity in hand” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). This enables those with dementia to have meaningful experience in the present moment that they inhabit.

Though this essay makes the argument for the benefit of community dance projects for those living with dementia, it is recognised that certain questions remain outstanding, which will need to be answered in order to provide a full analysis of the extent of the benefits such projects can have. The question whether someone with dementia can gain benefit from an activity even if the ‘flow state’ is not achieved is an important question to consider when analysing the holistic elements of dance in the Moving Minds Project. Also, can reaching a ‘flow state’ during a session help further ‘flow states’ to be experienced outside of the session, is a further question that requires investigation.

Throughout this essay, dance has essentially been treated as a medium for achieving the ‘flow state’ rather than being analysed in its own right. A further interesting direction for future research would be to fully explore the positive benefits of dance in and of itself for those living with dementia. Dance can encourage social engagement, trigger memories and help people living with dementia express their emotions. Furthermore, the elements of ourselves we may lose because of dementia is something that can potentially be found again through dance; as argued by Coaten, “what makes dance and movement so important is that its expression is close to the source and location of all those buried memories” (Coaten, 2007:19).

This essay has to recognise it has not explored all possible avenues for considering the importance of community dance projects, and dance itself, for those living with dementia. These additional dimensions will require attention before a truly comprehensive understanding of the subject can be achieved. Nevertheless, it is this essays position that enough can be said to illustrate the positive benefits of community dance projects for those living with dementia, thereby showing the importance of such work and the great benefits that further research should achieve.

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