

Exploring Engagement with Dance in an Educational Context: Reflections on the Creative Workers in the Schools Initiative 2021

By Susannah Keebler

This document is a part of my reflective process and presents some of my experiences during the Creative Workers in Schools program which I took part in from April- October, 2021. I will articulate some observations, experiences, challenges, and recommendations, but I would like to preface and intersperse my reflections with some background, because **“What is happening now comes from what happened before,”** to quote, Australian choreographer, Russel Dumas.

Reflections & Challenges

When I moved to Mallacoota in 2008 from New York City, I found a lot of the practices I was engaging with previously were irrelevant, inappropriate, and not possible to keep up, because my context, my community was completely different. It was difficult to transfer my dance practice to Mallacoota and it was challenging to deeply engage my audience. After performances I would not receive a lot of feedback about observations or experience of the dance but instead heard comments like, “I didn’t know you were so experimental.” This sent me on a long path of research asking the question: how is practice, encounter, and engagement with dance influenced by place and environment, particularly in a regional setting.

At the outset of the period as a Creative Worker in School, I set out to pay attention to and investigate the further question: **what is the relationship between my teaching practice and my general creative practice?**

It is important to note that I am practicing in an environment and community that has been impacted by multiple crises. First, the Black Summer Fires at the end of 2019 and subsequently the Coronavirus Pandemic which has been on-going from March of 2020. I am observing the relationships of my creative practice and my teaching practice *as well as* observing how those practices are influenced by the crises.

I would like to argue that placing a creative practitioner in an educational or school setting builds “resilience” on the individual, institutional, and community level. Resilience is a term that is thrown around a lot these days and means different things to different people, but here I refer to the adaptive tools and resources inbuilt within a system to support

relative continuity of creative practice. Ongoing creative practice supports wellbeing and social cohesiveness. This is not limited to creative practice placed into a therapeutic framework but is applicable to a wide gamut of creative arts practices.

A general observation on this matter is that while my practices are not always running smoothly during this period of cataclysm, they foremost serve to add to a personal sense of continuity and provide an avenue of connection and reflection on the disruptions for me and for others who participate in the variety of practices I offer, which include dance classes, performances, as well as research-centred practices.

Teaching and performance have the potential to seem like disparate practices. When I first arrived in Mallacoota, I had never taught dance. I was and am a certified Alexander Technique teacher and I had taught dancers the Alexander Technique, but at that time I had never taught a straight-up dance class and I set about to do it in a way that was very different to the way I was trained. The focus of my early training was almost purely on the technique of dancing and movement. I studied a little bit of choreographic composition and improvisation at the end of high school, which was later the focus of my tertiary education.

Consequently, I wanted to bring dance techniques, principles, and concepts together alongside creativity in the classes I taught and I found inspiration in the work of Anne Green Gilbert. Initially from her books and then I went to study with her in Seattle. Somewhere along the line or simultaneously, I realised that the methods I learned for teaching children worked just as well for adults in both an educational setting as well as, to a certain degree, a performance setting.

Anne used an idea called “Informance,” a mash-up of the verb ‘inform,’ the adjective ‘informal,’ and the noun ‘performance.’ I take it to mean an informal, informative performance. In the past, I have utilised this idea in open house/open classes for young students to share what they have been working on over time with invited parents, guardians, family, and friends. We would perform the structure of a class and present some of the creations that might have been made over the course of lessons. In this way the invited audience would get a sense of what happens in class, as well as the potential for more formal performance presentations.

Whilst I adore dance performance within a theatrical context, I have always equally enjoyed informal or studio performances and performances outside of the theatre as an audience member, a student, and as a performer. I have also experimented with Informances in slightly more formal contexts, setting up activities for the audience (those in the audience who wish) to take part in, that promote a slightly more active engagement with the performance. This can be as subtle as a seating arrangement which brings a heightened awareness to the choice of seat someone is making or as obvious as inviting audience members to participate in a dance activity.

My most recent creative work is concerned about audience engagement with dance materials and investigates conditions that create and support mutuality in a live performance. During this teaching period, I have been able to see clearly that teaching is a direct avenue of research for my choreographic, improvisation, and performance practices. In my experience, structures that engage young people will also engage adults.

I am interested in building more fluency with live dance in regional settings. Obviously having more engagement with live dance at an earlier age supports fluency. In this vein, I am creating dances that explore and expand the capacity of dance to educate and build its own audiences and publics through its own means. A big part of this is simply endeavoring to maintain a performance practice here in Mallacoota. The pieces I have made during this period will be the foundation of further investigation into interfaces that serve to connect my practice with my environment.

General engagement with dance and dance-fluency gained from encountering live dance is often a significant, on-going issue because live dance is not something that is in daily culture in many regional settings. In a classroom situation, I have been taught never to force dance students to dance, but instead to allow students to observe and to enter the dance activities at their own pace and readiness. This gives more agency and comfort to shy or inhibited students or students who are simply unaccustomed to larger, expressive movement. This usually works well for extracurricular, opt-in classes, but posed a bit of a problem in this all-in, school setting. Especially with the very young students (the preps and grade 1's for example), it can start a contagion of what felt like disruptive passivity. My solution was to add a third option of engagement: drawing.

Potential passive engagement is often present in my performance practice at times. That is not to say that observation is exclusively passive, and audiences should always be actively

participating. However, I believe audience-performer relationships and artistic experience can be greatly enriched by varied and interdisciplinary involvements and roles within a dance encounter. The option to observe and to have a personal and unique experience is always welcome and encouraged. I offered writing and drawing as a structured activity alongside cutting out anatomical structures in one of my pieces from 2017, called "Curios." However, I would like to simply offer drawing during future performances and longer dance classes. I have purchased drawing boards that can rest on the floor, ground, or on tables. I look forward to integrating this activity soon.

Insights & Highlights: The Micro-lesson

One of the challenges of working at Mallacoota P-12 College has been overarching time poverty. However, sometimes difficulty is the mother of invention. My plan for this project had been to run a series of progressive lessons that would build and collect over time. This is my preferred way of working and sharing knowledge, i.e., in an iterative and processual way. However, I realised that for some of the classes I needed to develop micro-lessons: short, modular lessons that could fit in and flavour other established on-going activities or projects, especially as I established or re-established relationships within the school.

The micro-lessons are complete in themselves, but last only 10 or 15 minutes depending upon time availability. Working this way also enabled me to team-teach without requisite hours spent on collaborating and coordinating lesson plans. I only had a chance to try this with a couple of teachers, but I believe it also drew teachers into the dancing more so than when I led a whole class session. It also seemed to entice more connections with the other material and activities happening within the class, such as bringing awareness of the use of one's kinesphere, or self-space, into a music class or bringing more awareness to generalised creative choice-making. An example of this is a micro lesson based on Ruth Zaporah's "Facings and Placings," integrating a whole-body breathing warm-up into an exercise exploring direction and relationship. The students then asked to take that awareness created in the exercise into their small group ensemble music practice.

Some of the micro lessons I had a chance to deploy in my limited time as a CWS were centred around a particular dance form, such as the *Farandole* or snail dance, one of the oldest dance forms we know and one that can be found in many different cultures. I often teach this dance in a broad, community setting, as anyone that can move in some way can

do this dance. Very young students tended to latch onto these dances readily and the dances taught this way seemed to be something they wanted to repeat again and again.

These micro-lessons cut-through, subvert normative thinking, and self-iterate, but I am not sure at this point what the interrelationship of the dance formations and the specific nature of the lessons are to their placement in the school context. I would like to research this phenomenon for future reference and to understand why it worked the way it did. I recommend that other practitioners try micro-lessons, and I will be experimenting with working this way in the future particularly for initial or 'taster' classes.

In my opinion, the school setting is the ideal place to offer dance in a regional setting such as Mallacoota. I had success offering:

- self-contained (45-60 minute) taster classes,
- cross-curricular micro-lessons that connect with other subjects and projects,
- lunchtime or after school opt-in classes,
- and ancillary classes, such as, yoga and meditation class.

The latter was provided on the senior students' requests. Yoga and Alexander Technique are an important support and influence on my own dance and performance practices. I am also known locally for teaching yoga, and I find most yoga students, especially beginners, want to practice with others of their own age range and physical abilities. Some of the senior students at Mallacoota P-12 College have already established creative practices (I mostly observed music and writing) and they were seeking support for that alongside of their studies. Teaching self-care as a touchstone of creativity is aligned with an emancipatory pedagogy and can reflect best standards of artistic practice.

Observations & Recommendations

The most difficult challenge of the project was my relationship with the formal body of Mallacoota P-12 College, not the individual relationships. This was encapsulated when, after the one lockdown at the beginning of August, the new handbook was released by the School Board and the then acting principal wrote to my primary school contact: "the department would not deem the creative workers to be essential." My RAV manager, had written to the principal previously about possible alternative deliveries. However, the non-live options the school suggested were not practicable in the amount of time I had left

on the job. My alternative plans had been in a live remote-delivery format, but that was not practicable from the school's position.

Roadblocks were absolutely expected, and I rationally understand why this judgement was made. However, I did not expect how this would (1.) influence my feelings and (2.) resonate with last year's on-going unemployment due to the bushfires and the pandemic and the awareness of how little mainstream culture appreciates the intrinsic values of artmaking. I coped with this distress by taking plenty time to change the course of my work. The fact that Regional Arts Victoria allowed for this discontinuity, helped me to pick up the pieces and adapt and continue my work in a different form. I did do some experiments with pre-recorded video, but in the end, it did not seem like an appropriate format for the cohorts I was working with in school especially when they went back to in-person classes and they were pivot- and screen-exhausted.

Another challenge was the press embargo requirement that the CWS were held to almost throughout the entirety of the residency. This kind of hold implies a trust, but we were never given any information about the reasons behind the non-disclosure request. Usually, embargoes of this nature are agreements between parties with a predetermined date for information release. The one-sided nature of this embargo felt manipulative and served to undermine one of the key elements of the initiative, namely the professional development of the creative artists in an educational setting. One big detriment that creative artists working in educational settings face is visibility. Our work is often invisible and any educational work with children is a long game.

As a consequence of the embargo, I was not able to describe the work I was doing to my online social network, which is my only broad social network during the pandemic. Furthermore, I was not able to introduce the project to the Mallacoota P-12 College community because the school newsletter is the town paper and published online. I understand the embargo has the potential to be protective of such a complex program, however, this extreme 4.5-month-long embargo was harmful. I am still in a quandary about what to say about it when I tell people in the community about what I've been doing the past 6 months and they are surprised it has not been announced. When I say that I was under an embargo for 4.5 months its simply not good public relations.

I would also like to bring forward some specific observations and recommendations around arts-sector employment in the regional context. In my opinion, several things up

front were exactly right about this program particularly for a regional, disaster-impacted setting:

- 1) that a local artist was employed,
- 2) that the artist was salaried,
- 3) that the residency period was longer than three months.

I feel this could be the establishment of a baseline for other artists to work here in the school or other organizations/sectors within our community.

In the period following the bushfires that impacted Mallacoota in 2020, we were inundated with necessary relief workers from out of town. This was absolutely wanted and needed for our survival and for initiating recovery. However, there has been some visiting creative response that was non-collaborative, did not seek to involve local artists, or did not help to re-establish existing programming that had been happening prior to the fires. Helping local artists and arts educators re-establish their existing programming and be a part of recovery efforts should have been a first priority.

After a disaster of this magnitude, the felt-sense of loss and loss of agency is indescribable. For this reason, it is important for creative responders to “attend to the energies”¹ of trauma-impacted people and places within creative practice. Attending to the energies requires a slower pace than some might be accustomed to. It requires a disruption of often perceived flow to allow for what is needed or substantive to come forward. I suspect that attending energies is useful in any trauma-impacted scenario. **For early incursions in disaster-affected areas, the ground is unstable for everyone.**

I understand that Regional Arts Victoria is advocating for the continuation of this program in future with the possibility of expanding it to artists working across a variety of sectors, such as the sciences. I think this is a great idea, but a big challenge for artists in this process is the partnership itself. A successful application to participate in this program relies upon a previously established connection. It seems like **a structural part of the program should be to instead establish and facilitate these partnerships. Networking and making collaborative connections are an integral challenge for regional artists, especially those in remote communities.**

¹ I am quoting Padma Newsome.

In my case, this circumstance worked well, because I was seeking to *re-establish* a previous connection with Mallocoota P-12 College, its teachers and students, which I ultimately did successfully. Even though the project was not taken to full blossom, I feel re-established in those relationships which are now ripe for future work together, when conditions allow for it.

I consider myself an “embedded artist” in Mallocoota. I am a witness to life here from the inside and I am beholden and responsible to that experience. In my usage, the embed refers not to an institution, but to a particular place. Furthermore, the embedded artist is situated from the inside rather than placed from the outside. This is a different experience to a residency or an artist-in-residence. That said, I believe residencies are invaluable to artists and communities alike.

I stipulated earlier that the 6-month contract of the CWS program was a positive feature because it was longer than three months. Three months is roughly the minimum for getting a more embedded experience because it stretches over or across a seasonal period. Experiencing the seasonal change of a place deepens one’s experience of a place, its people, other animals, and environment by simply giving a wider breadth of an encounter and a longer duration to build relationships and share practice. It is not necessarily, the longer the better, but rather, that longer stretches of time offer more opportunities to build observations, understanding, and potentially deeper connection. This is particularly true in an educational setting, because of the layered and necessarily cyclical nature of learning. For example, there is potential for a young student to learn more in 10 sessions over 10 weeks than in 2 workshops.

I have a long-held dream-fantasy of an on-going arts residency in Mallocoota. In my dreams, the residency is an exchange program between artists and their place of residence. The exchange could happen between a visiting artist(s) and a local artist(s) as well as happening between artists and an organisation in the community. The visiting artist(s) could be based in a metropolitan centre or they could be based in another regional location. However, I believe the key is in the artist-to artist exchange, which centres creative workers and cultural exchange and development.

Performing artists are often particularly tightly bound to the city-country binary for economic reasons. This means that many performing artists miss out on what regional or

rural life has to offer. Conversely, as mentioned previously, regional artists are often isolated and not very well networked. There are very few forums for regional artists to network and connect. As regional artists, we often must go to metropolitan centres for peer-to-peer connection and professional development, but the needs and concerns of a regionally-based arts practice are often distinctly different from a city-based practice.

From the perspective of a resident Mallacoota artist, even the dream of a regular Mallacoota residency is difficult to conceptualise in a way that serves the artist, the creative practice *and* the broader community at large. A program conceptualised by someone or an organization further afield has even less of a chance at satisfying these interests. In my opinion, **local, regional artists should be at the centre of programming development not just recipients of a trickle-down programming or funding thought up by arts administrators, managers, arts bodies, and organisations.** An artist-to-artist exchange could provide visiting artists with a host as well as provide a means for exchange. I believe this would particularly assist an artist that comes into a place impacted by disaster as well as lend some sense of agency to embedded artists impacted by disaster.

I believe an **artist-to-artist exchange** would help both local and guest artists address some of the principles articulated in the Arts Responder Check-list² when attending to one's relationship to a local community:

- *"autonomy: self-design*
- *agency and respect*
- *what's past? what's next?*
- *skill based delivery*
- *Look and wait for requests and ideas that come from outside creating easier routes forward: what I call "attending energies".*
- *Pause before **inventing** the creative space*
- *Pause before **entering** the creative space*
- *Pause before **creating** a space/place and inviting others into it. "*

An artist-to-artist exchange or shared practice might be an equitable way to conceptualise an artist residency in a small, remote place like Mallacoota. This would go beyond outreach and the kind of programming that we are accustomed to seeing in the regional setting, where a city-based artist comes into a regional or remote setting and shares their practice. This goes a couple of steps further, giving the visiting artist a

² The ARC-List is a document written by Padma Newsome, on which I was a co-researcher.

host/guide/colleague/collaborator for sharing practice, as well as connecting the artists to an organisation within the community.

Festina Lente (Make Haste Slowly)

*Slowly make haste, and without losing courage;
Twenty times redo your work;
Polish and re-polish endlessly,
And sometimes add, but often take away*

- Nicolas Bolieau

Overall, I would characterise the CWS initiative as it played out in Mallacoota, as a catalyst and one that deserves to be revised again and developed further. My work in this project is about long-term achievement. Throughout the CWS process, it occurred to me that adaptability is part of the inherent nature of artistic practice as well as being part and parcel of the art of teaching. It also reaffirmed what I learned from the bushfires, that in the context of crisis, nothing ever goes as neatly as planned, but having a plan and clear objectives keeps you grounded and helps maintain a sense of meaning. Relaxed timeliness and adaptability are always imperative in this field, but particularly in these circumstances.

In hindsight, I would have conceptualised the taster classes from the beginning as part of the overall process, documenting along the way. The major pitfalls of the project revolved around the felt sense of lost opportunities. I understand now a bit more about the windows of opportunity afforded by a global pandemic. Looking back, I believe my CWS project was successful, mostly because of the relationships reaffirmed and now being forged.

Towards the end of this process, we have been asked to think about what the impact of our work in the CWS program on myself, students and teachers, and the Mallacoota community has been. I prefer to use the word influence because it implies power through flow rather than impingement through force.

Significantly, this program has influenced me and my practice positively by compensating me financially for my work during this period of time. After not working all of 2020 due to the bushfires and subsequently the pandemic. Being able to contribute to my household through my professional work, lends me a sense of self-determination which has and is

allowing me to have sense of grounding and being held with care. It has also given me a sense of connection to other creative workers, many with similar values. I have hope of continuing some of the remote relationships I have made and hopefully meet in person down the road.

My work with the CWS program has also positively influenced the students and teachers at Murrumbidgee P-12 College. Outside help and influence from an arts specialist like me was and is most welcome by teachers. Dance is in the National curriculum, but many teachers are not confident in this area for various reasons. Enriching what teachers are already doing strengthens their undertaking. Murrumbidgee P-12 College is the largest employer in Murrumbidgee. If one influences Murrumbidgee P-12 favourably, then one can influence the whole town by association. I worked directly with 85+ people during the CWS program, that is roughly 8.5% of the population. Education is always a long game, but the students are already repeating dances I have taught them. This work has planted seeds for future classes at the school and within the community which are already sprouting. Furthermore, the intrinsic value of dance and art tends to be ignored even though

“it is often not recognised that artists and audiences alike do not take part in the arts purely for social or economic benefit, but rather to enjoy intrinsic benefits, such as inspiration, excitement, understanding, etc. The intrinsic benefits are the foundation for the ecological economy of our living culture.”³

³ ThinkTank Dance Assembly members, “The Impact to the Arts of COVID-19, from Members of Melbourne’s Contemporary Dance Community,” Letter submitted (to which I contributed written materials) to the Parliamentary Inquiry into benefits and impacts of the arts conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts, October 2020.