

Developing empathy and creativity through the virtual dance community

Zihao (Michael) Li

Abstract

The present study explores the paradigm shift experienced by dance teachers, students, and artists in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic from face-to-face to virtual environments. Drawing on the experiences and reflections of approximately 120 participants during the pandemic period, this investigation sheds light on the transformative potential of the virtual dance environment to promote empathy and community development by facilitating the communication of thoughts, feelings, and experiences through physical signals and written texts. The study provides an opportunity for dance educators, students, and artists to share problems, exchange ideas, and gain knowledge in response to the pandemic. The research reveals that students are more adaptable to virtual learning environments than teachers. Meanwhile, dance artists continue to evolve and innovate by promoting their works through social media and developing new channels. The study further demonstrates that the pandemic constraints have fostered a spirit of innovation in teaching, learning, and performance in the dance field. The findings offer valuable insights and recommendations and provide a guide for future dance education and artistic practitioners in an ever-changing world.

Keywords: Dance, COVID-19, virtual teaching, social media, entrepreneurship

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on education, and dance has not been immune to these changes. It has severely disrupted the performing arts industry, forcing many artists to cancel or postpone live events. However, the emergence of virtual platforms provided opportunities for dance teachers to continue teaching dance and for artists to showcase their talents in new and innovative ways. This paper examines three case studies that shed light on the ways in which dance has adapted to the new reality brought about by the pandemic.

The first case study focuses on the Community Folk Art Council of Toronto's Dance Marathon, which was able to continue online to the quick shift of delivery modes by its organizer, Dr. Kar Paromita. The second case study examines a cross-cultural study of virtual dance teaching and learning, which involved 140 participants from various countries. The final case study focuses on entrepreneurship by looking at how a freshly graduated dance teacher found success in social media. These case studies highlight the potential of virtual platforms in the performing arts sector, and how digital technology can enhance creative expression and broaden opportunities for dance education. Virtual platforms are a workable substitute for live concerts and festivals during pandemics and under other difficult circumstances. It is predicted that such a trend will continue even after the pandemic is over.

Literature review

For dance educators and students, the challenges of adapting from face-to-face to online or hybrid modes of teaching and learning are immense, but also present opportunities for creativity and innovation (Li, 2021a, 2021b, 2023). Studies have found that the use of technology for teaching during the pandemic has increased sharply (Schmid and McGreevy-Nicholas 2021; Gingrasso, 2020; Weber, 2021; Li, 2021a, 2023). It develops and forms a virtual dance community (Gingrasso, 2020; Weber 2021). Teachers and students interact comfortably in online dance classes (Schmid and McGreevy-Nicholas, 2021). In the restricted virtual environment, the level of creativity in dance choreography is boosted (Li, 2021a, 2022, 2023), collaboration is increased (Heyang and Martin, 2020), and collaborative energy is found among virtual participants to share their insights and resources with each other (Schmid and McGreevy-Nicholas, 2021).

Technology strengthens pedagogy by providing diverse tools and resources for teachers (Li, 2011). For example, laptops and Pads were used to create digital music playlists, video libraries, and photo galleries that support teachers' practical and theory-based dance classes (Ostashewski et al., 2016). Numerous schools and companies turn to web-based platforms for teaching and that includes Canada's National Ballet School, Opera Atelier, and the Dance Education Laboratory (Li, 2021a, 2022). The Dance Maker app helps teachers develop dance courses and movement sequences with various online classes and tools. Technology, particularly mobile devices has facilitated feedback and assessment by allowing teachers to review videos of students' work and provide comments or suggestions (Zhou and Li, 2019; Li et al., 2018, 2022a, 2022b; Li, 2023; Li and Wong 2023).

Technology enhances learning by enabling students to access diverse sources of information, ideas, and potential opportunities. Students are fluent with the latest technologies (Robinson, 2011; Li et al., 2022b; Zhou and Li, 2019; Li 2023). They watch online videos of professional dancers or performances from different genres, cultures, or contexts to broaden their perspectives and appreciation of dance as an art form (Weber, 2021). Students also use social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok to share their dance works with a wider audience or connect with other dancers around the world for feedback or collaboration (Li et al., 2018, 2022a, 2022b). Students experiment with new formats and styles of presentation while collaborating with others in various disciplines (Li, 2022; 2023). Technology support self-directed learning by allowing students to explore their own interests or passions in dance (Weber, 2021) and take charge of their own learning pace (Parrish, 2007).

Technology optimizes performance by offering new possibilities for expression, creativity, and innovation. Students can use digital tools such as video editing software (Li et al., 2022a), or projection mapping to create multimedia dance projects that combine movement with sound, image, text, or other elements (Weber, 2021). Dance

artists use virtual reality (VR) devices or online platforms such as Zoom to create immersive or interactive dance experiences that transcend physical boundaries or limitations (Li, 2020). Technology challenges teachers to think beyond face-to-face as the only means of course delivery (Li, 2023; Li & Wong 2023). It pushes students to experiment with new forms or styles of dance that reflect their identities or contexts (Weber, 2021; Li & Wong 2023). It helps both dance teachers and students develop stronger careers aspect in a changing world (Li, 2023).

Technology also boosts entrepreneurship for dance students. Li (2021a) asserts that entrepreneurship in dance education has the potential to help dance students develop entrepreneurial skills and mindsets. This could, in turn, enhance their employability (Vanevenhoven & Vanevenhoven, 2021), creativity (Li, 2021a), and social impact (Li et al., 2022b). Scholars argues that entrepreneurial dancers should develop a business mindset that includes financial management, networking, and social media skills to thrive in the dance industry (Barbour et al., 2019). Their findings are further echoed in recent studies that show how students thrive in social media platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram, and Little Red Book (Weber, 2021; Li et al., 2022b; Li, 2023).

Overall, technology brings positive outcomes as it enables dance teaching, learning, and performance during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has fostered digital dance education by forcing educators, students, and artists to adapt to new modes of course delivery, interaction, and performance. However, technology integration in dance education is not without challenges, such as technical issues, accessibility, the loss of live interaction with spectators, reduced quality or authenticity of expression, or ethical issues related to intellectual property or ethical concerns.

Research design

The study utilizes a qualitative research approach with the goal of understanding the experiences of dance teachers, students, and artists with the shift from face-to-face to virtual environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the methodology for this study involved gathering qualitative data through semi-structured interviews and thematically examining the large amount of data collected among 120+ participants. These 120+ members were given a survey to share their experiences in teaching and learning dance. Among them, 10 were randomly chosen for a focus group study. They were then asked to discuss their ideas and personal experiences with virtual learning during the pandemic.

Thematic analysis was used to examine the data, which entailed finding themes and patterns in the participants' answers. The analysis was primarily concerned with finding the difficulties, advantages, and opportunities brought about by the shift from face-to-face to virtual learning and performing environments during the pandemic. Throughout the research, ethical issues were taken into account, such as getting participants' informed consent and preserving their anonymity and confidentiality. All permissions were granted regarding photos or artworks shown in this article.

Dance marathon in Toronto

The pandemic hit Canada badly as it did for other places. The dance community in Toronto was able to continue its legacy by staging various performances online, including the Dance Marathon, which was organized by the Community Folk Art Council of Toronto. The organizer, Dr. Kar Paromita shared her experiences of reluctance to make any change to becoming a specialist in digital means of online streaming.

Dr. Kar came from a very traditional background. She lived in Northern India before coming to study at York University's Dance Department. Before the pandemic, she danced while her husband played music. Her husband taught at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto. Both of them were conservative in staging performances. She stated,

When the pandemic hit Canada in March 2020, we were actually supposed to have a full season of performances across Canada. March is the season of Nowruz, or Persian New Year. Typically every year, this is one of our busiest performance seasons. My company *Ensemble Topaz* specializes in live event performances for special events and festivals. The pandemic put everything to an absolute halt.

Dr. Kar and her husband's experience in staging performances online shows the value of virtual platforms in the performing arts sector. Their livelihood suffered a great deal when the pandemic forced the cancellation of their full performance season. However, the Aga Khan Museum's option of a video performance pushed them into the digital realm, enabling them to continue their business. They were able to stage their performances online to viewers from all parts of the country and beyond. Their weekly *Global Rhythms Live: World Music and Dance Digital Concert series* drew a sizable audience and it ran from April to November 2020.

The Community Folk Art Council (CFAC) of Toronto became aware of the couple's online success. The organizing committee was inspired and hence, adopted their model for its Multicultural Canada Day Celebration, which is typically held live each year at Yonge-Dundas Square in downtown Toronto. With the success of the couple's virtual performance experience, they live-streamed several events in subsequent months. They applied a similar technology model comparable to their *Global Rhythms Live series*. With relatively low-cost technology, they were able to hold a six-hour event that was split into two slots of three hours, except for the announcer, who provided live hosting. The online performance link can be accessed [here](#).



Figure 1. Dr. Kar's live-streamed events during the COVID-19 pandemic

The successful live-streamed dance events demonstrated how virtual platforms can be a workable substitute for live concerts and festivals during the pandemic and other difficult circumstances. The arts and entertainment sector is not the only one that engaged in virtual platforms. Virtual meetings, workshops, ceremonies, and conferences are now regularly held by numerous organizations, including education sectors around the world. The following case study is in that context.

Virtual dance learning and teaching

To investigate what undergraduate students thought of online dance education, a cross-cultural study was conducted. In southern China, 121 students (86 female and 35 male) were surveyed in January 2020 at the University of Macau, a comprehensive university. The students took both general education elective classes and introductory dance studies courses. In July, nine Canadian students—six females and three males from postsecondary schools in Toronto were enlisted to broaden the study's focus and collect a more diverse array of viewpoints. Additionally, ten dance instructors from various nations were interviewed to learn more about the experience of online dance training. One hundred and forty participants from countries such as Macau, mainland China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, New Zealand, South Korea, the United States, and the

Philippines shared their virtual dance learning and teaching experiences. To demonstrate how digital technology encouraged creative expression and broadened opportunities for dance education, selected student artworks were presented.

The study revealed that both teachers and students originally expressed hesitation and doubts about switching from conventional face-to-face dance lessons to the online environment. They did, however, find a new degree of creativity that they had not previously envisioned as they adjusted to the new medium of expression via digital technologies. Digital tools, such as Canvas (learning management system), Zoom (virtual conference), and Instagram (social media), among others, enabled students and instructors to investigate and experiment with a broad variety of spaces, both indoors and outdoors.

Dance teachers and students

Nick (all names are pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy), a highly esteemed dance educator with more than 20 years of studio expertise in New Zealand, shared his enthusiasm for the excellent student dance works that he received during the pandemic. He echoed Sir Ken Robison's assertion that students were more adept at using technology, particularly mobile devices than their teachers (Robinson, 2011). In other words, dance students accepted the digital transition from face-to-face to the virtual environment faster than teachers. Jenifer, a dance professor with more than 30 years of experience who serves as the head of a dance education program in New York City, was equally impressed by the vibrant and engaging works created by her students. She made note of the adaptations made to dance activities, which were carried out not only outside or in confined spaces, but also using a range of various learning styles and tools. Additionally, she observed students' sense of accomplishment in their creative dance works, which were posted on various social media platforms. Paula, a seasoned dancer, choreographer, and producer from London, taught virtual ballet and creative workshops during the pandemic. She enhanced instruction and learning by using a variety of digital tools.

Many students found it useful to attend online dance lessons with multiple devices. The survey data generated a technology *toolkit* for effective dance learning. A smartphone is a must-have item in a digital device *toolkit*, which also contains laptop computers, speakers, and bluetooth earbuds. Every technology aids learning in a different way. Online dance lessons encouraged everyone to "think outside of the classroom" asserted a dance student. "All possible spaces were used for dance practice and creativity was boosted, credit to digital technology," another student echoed. A few Toronto dance students mentioned how much they liked the online environment. "We could never imagine that a smartphone could be used in so many different ways, they expressed in their statements." In one case, a student used a split-screen feature to create a duet performance by recording two dancers separately. In addition, dance students used various video editing apps to duplicate dancers, manipulate choreographies, change settings/lights, revise music, and even include animated

stickers and infographics in their dance works. The level of creativity and the quality of student work was unprecedented according to many dance educators' comments.



Figure 2. Dance teaching and learning at various places

Challenges & opportunities

Dance instructors are accustomed to conventional teaching and there was little institutional support to help them transition teaching from a face-to-face mode to a virtual format. Although technology has altered dance education significantly, there is little proof that instructors are prepared to teach dance online. Teachers have had a difficult time adjusting to the virtual teaching setting, especially in practice-based classes such as ballet technique, repertoire, and performance. In contrast, students have adapted quickly to the new online learning model, but there is still room for improvement in terms of using various technologies effectively.

In general, this cross-cultural research emphasizes the potential of digital technology and how it impacts practice-based fields like dance teaching and learning. Dance students and educators have demonstrated extraordinary adaptability and fortitude in overcoming these challenges and achieving outstanding outcomes during the pandemic. The unexpected high levels of creativity serve as a powerful reminder of how virtual dance courses can open doors for everyone in the field. With regard to new

opportunities, the next case study depicts how an outside-of-box thinker/dancer/educator thrives in the digital social media world.

Entrepreneurship in dance

Entrepreneurship in dance education is an emerging area of research that explores the ways in which dance students can develop business thinking and skills to enhance their careers and benefit society. In the digital era, dance educators should recognize the potential impact of social media on cultivating entrepreneurship and promoting accessibility in dance education. They should encourage dance students to use technology creatively and strategically. That includes equipping dance students with valuable skills and mindsets that can enhance their careers and benefit society in the long term. Mila's dance teaching experience on YouTube serves as a testament to the power of social media in expanding the reach of dance education and inspiring entrepreneurship among dance students.

In the age of the internet, social media platforms have developed into a potent instrument for fostering entrepreneurship in a variety of industries, including dance. The potential influence of social media on dance education is best illustrated by Mila, a dance instructor and Master of Fine Arts graduate from New York University. Her YouTube channel, *Plié for The People* offers online ballet classes to students from throughout the world. Through this platform, Mila has been able to go beyond financial and geographic obstacles to provide accessible and inexpensive dance classes to underserved populations.

In the Bronx, New York City, Mila's second-grade public school student expressed her passion for dancing despite her financial constraints. This was the impetus for Mila's social media business in dance education. The pandemic made it more difficult for her pupils to continue their interest in regular dance classes in public schools because face-to-face courses were no longer offered. Mila created *Plié for The People*, a YouTube channel that provides free online ballet lessons, which were specially designed for small spaces. With *Plié for The People*, Mila was able to provide her students and other underprivileged students the chance to continue their dance education without having to worry about money or physical restrictions.

Within a short period of time, *Plié for The People* has grown exponentially, attracting hundreds of thousands of views worldwide. She is able to secure a personalized YouTube account by gaining more than 800 subscribers. To this date, she has featured 170+ online ballet classes ever since she started her channel. During the pandemic, online platforms are a crucial means to continue teaching dance in many places. While traditional face-to-face dance classes have their merits, online platforms offer opportunities for accessible and affordable dance education to students who may not have access to traditional dance classes due to financial difficulty. By leveraging technology and social media, Mila overcomes geographical, financial, and logistical barriers and makes dance education more inclusive and accessible to all. Mila's success on YouTube highlights the potential impact of social media on promoting

accessibility and entrepreneurship in dance education. Dance educators can learn from Mila's example and encourage their students to leverage technology creatively and strategically to promote their own dance businesses or initiatives early on.

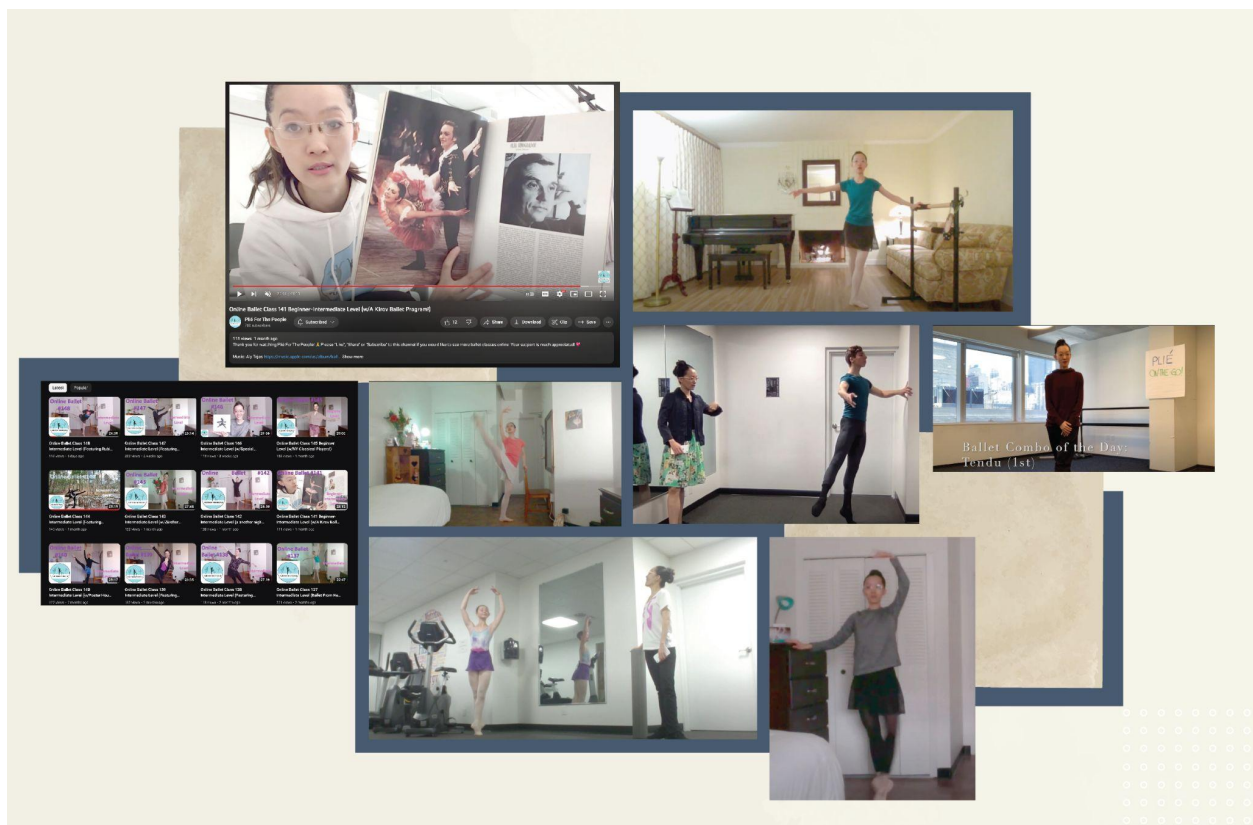


Figure 3. Mila's *Plié for The People* YouTube channel

Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok have become powerful tools for dance educators to promote accessibility, expand research, and continue to teach when a face-to-face environment is not available during the pandemic. Hence, it is extremely important to cultivate entrepreneurship in dance classes. Mila's dance outreach experience on YouTube is a testament to the potential impact of social media on promoting accessibility and entrepreneurship in dance education. By encouraging dance students to utilize technology creatively and strategically, we equip them with the necessary skills and mindsets so that they can outperform others who just focus on technical training. Dance educators must recognize the potential of social media, online platforms, and tools to promote inclusive and accessible dance education.

Limitations and conclusion

This study explores the experiences of dance educators and performing artists worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights how the pandemic resulted in the cancelation of live performances/lectures and forced artists/educators to transition to

virtual platforms. The research reveals how digital technologies enabled performers and recent dance graduates to adapt to the new virtual realm, allowing them to showcase their work to larger and more diverse audiences.

It is evident that technology has enabled quality dance education and performance during the pandemic. Nonetheless, dance educators and practitioners must be critical, resourceful, reflective, and flexible when using technology in their practice, and seek ways to balance its benefits and disadvantages. Technology is not a replacement for human interaction, but an effective tool to enhance what people do. The change has already occurred as many conferences opt for hybrid and numerous performances are live-streamed. Dance educators and practitioners must catch up and adapt to the new teaching, learning, and performance environments.

The findings from these three case studies underscore the importance of integrating digital technologies into the education and performing arts sectors. As we continue to live in an increasingly digitalized world, it is crucial that we equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in the modern workforce. Additionally, the use of digital technologies in teaching dance can promote inclusion and provide greater access to quality education, especially for students in underserved communities.

This research paper provides compelling evidence supporting the integration of digital technologies in education and performance. While there are certainly challenges associated with this process, such as ensuring equitable access to technology and addressing privacy concerns, the benefits outweigh the risks. It is clear that digital technologies have the potential to enhance dance education, and it is incumbent upon educators and policymakers to enable and facilitate these tools so they may be incorporated into dance practice. The study also provides valuable insights into the benefits of virtual platforms in the performing arts sector as digital technologies have expanded opportunities for artistic expression and creative education, even through difficult circumstances. Digital technology can facilitate a sense of empathy and creativity through virtual dance communities. The pandemic has increased the use of virtual platforms, and this trend will continue. In conclusion, Dr. Kar Paromita's states;

The pandemic may have halted live performances, but it hasn't stopped creativity and innovation in the arts.

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Biography

Dr. Li promotes a pedagogy that combines creative arts, education, and technology. He has published a number of journal articles on how the pandemic helps dance educators to make a paradigm shift in pedagogy. He currently applies a multimodal approach that leverages artificial intelligence (i.e., ChatGPT or Midjourney) to enhance dance teaching, learning, research, and performance. Li serves as a Principal Head, co-

overseeing the Centre for Education and Research, which comprises General/Liberal Arts Education, Practice/Performance as Research; and Education, Information & Technology at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.

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