

# ENCOURAGING GRADE 6 AND 7 BOYS TO EMBRACE DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES THROUGH CONSENSUS IN GROUP LEARNING

Annette Briscoe

Durban Preparatory High School, South Africa

## **Abstract**

The Durban Preparatory High School (DPHS) gumboot dance team—a highly successful dance group which acknowledges and reflects the lifestyles of South Africans, their cultural traditions and practices—was exposed to new, challenging activities in 2016. Teamwork, essential to convey the message of the dance, was highlighted as the boys were guided through a series of activities which revealed flaws in their collaborative team efforts. Personal differences, communication skills, cross-cultural identities and lack of consensus amongst team members needed to be resolved for the continued success of the group.

A series of collaboration skills was devised and explored in weekly rehearsals. Paired and team tasks that required boys to confront real-life uncertainties and ambiguities followed. The boys had to analyze, explore, build consensus, and draw conclusions about issues outlined in the tasks. Through interaction and discussion, the boys clarified their thoughts and formulated a process for creating, rehearsing and staging new dances, by consensus.

The final task—the production of a noteworthy dance, which was choreographed, rehearsed and performed—revealed enhanced collaborative and performance skills achieved by group consensus.

## **Introduction**

Gumboot dance is an extracurricular activity at Durban Preparatory High School. Boys in Grades 6 and 7 are eligible to join the gumboot dance team, irrespective of their dance knowledge or experience. The “folk” element of gumboot dance, rooted in various traditional African dance genres, synthesized with contemporary urban dance styles, determines the creation and choreography of modern, eclectic gumboot dance. Boys learn traditional and contemporary dance steps. Grade 7 team members teach new team members before well-rehearsed dances are staged or shared in community workshops.

Gumboot dance is a channel for understanding and appreciating the practices of a melting pot of cultural traditions in our South African society. The roots of gumboot dance are firmly entrenched in the traditional dances of the representative groups of people who worked on the mines. The dance steps were transferred to, transformed, and utilised in the working environment, which was totally different to the traditional, tribal lifestyle of the miners. By tradition, the workers experienced art as an integral part of everyday life. Recreational gumboot dance for the migrant mine workers filled the void created by a working environment stripped bare of familiar means of expressing happiness, joy, sorrow, grief, frustration, contentment and the celebration of significant events. Gumboot dance reflects everyday life in microcosm.

Group work is essential to attain proficiency in this dance genre, to choreograph dances which deliver authentic, meaningful messages, as well as for the presentation and performance of noteworthy gumboot dances. During rehearsals, I observed team members who were unable to resolve conflicts with others. Many disagreed with each other with total disregard for differing points of view. Some team members expressed extreme irritation and impatience with performers who required extended assistance. Certain team members were excluded by others who believed they “owned” the dance style due to their cultural heritage. The “owners” of the dance resented the excellent performance and contributions of those team members with a different cultural heritage.

To improve the operating basis of the dance team, I chose to explore the impact of collaborative skills, specifically taught to team members, to ascertain the possibility of empowering the participants to teach, rehearse, create, choreograph sequences and perform willingly with a common purpose and goal. These objectives were articulated in my research question “*How might awareness of the power of consensus in group learning activities encourage Grade 6 and 7 boys to embrace different perspectives?*”

Action research, “A practical tool for developing solutions to problems experienced by stakeholders” (Stringer, 2014), was the method chosen to investigate the activities of the gumboot dance group. Through this reflective and collaborative process, I was able to examine my educational practice within the context of my teaching environment to determine how to improve or make changes to my teaching. Action research is cyclical and solutions-oriented,

requiring participants to collaboratively describe and interpret events, and then formulate mutually acceptable solutions to problems they are experiencing.

### **Literature Review**

Stringer's (2014) comprehensive presentation of the action research process is a collaborative approach to research, involving all participants as equals. The researcher facilitates and acts as a catalyst in the process. The method of looking/observing, collecting data using a minimum of three methods, analyzing data and adjusting interventions based on the current activities, and following up with in-depth qualitative reports, benefits all participants.

A two-fold investigation of collaborative processes was required to facilitate individual understanding of collaboration which, in turn, could inform group collaborative efforts. Depth of focus on this symbiotic process was imperative for noteworthy individual and group participation in this project. The University Park Campus School in Worcester MA provides practical advice and guidance for introducing this process in their program entitled, *Teaching Group Work: Building Student Collaboration and Agency* (2016). Working with others to appreciate what they are saying, reflection on individual understanding and skills to approach others, require introductory warm-up activities to heighten awareness of facets of good and bad group work. Boys need to share and acknowledge different learning methods. Initial problem-solving tasks must be accessible to team members so that they feel comfortable from the outset when contributing their ideas.

I was mindful of the need for the boys to be comfortable in the group before introducing *The Gradual Release of Responsibility* (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) or *I Do It, We Do It, You Do It* (Gradual Release, 2008), which is transferable to many teaching situations (Harvey & Daniels, 2015). Harvey and Daniels outline lessons, practices and processes that may be implemented across the curriculum and at all grade levels. It was hoped participants in this action research project might continue practising what they learned from these interventions and repeatedly apply their learned skills in other groups.

In addition, Harvey and Daniels (2015) outline clear social skills for all participants. Gumboot dance team members could bring their existing collaboration skills to rehearsals and through the action research process, have a forum in which they could refine and develop their individual collaborative skills and apply them in the dance team and in everyday interactions in the

classroom and community. Included in these processes is the development of an ethos of co-ownership and distributed group responsibility.

Leigh Thompson explores the creative output of the group in contrast to individual creativity in a collaborative team context (2013). She defines creative collaboration as, “The ability of teams and their leaders to organize, motivate and combine talent to generate new and useful ideas” (p 62). Creative collaboration has the attributes of a conspiracy in which the energy generated by collaborative work empowers teams to meet creative challenges. Periods of independent work interspersed with periods of intensely structured team interaction, team rules, conflict resolution within the team, team goals, and conscious control of the physical and social environment are the cornerstones of creative collaboration.

Friedman’s (2012) book on dance in South Africa includes submissions on cultural and social contextual considerations for the gumboot dance genre from 1994 - 2012. South African contemporary dance includes many dance genres, which create “a domain of reality in which social and emotional conflicts can be brought out into the open and made available for public discussion.” (Maqoma cited in Friedman, 2012, p. 10) I used many of these submissions to gain insight into the cultural milieu of the DPHS gumboot dance team to date.

Bannerman (2014) likens communication in dance, through cultural codes, to that of language. Vocabulary and syntax in language are matched with dance. Individual dance steps providing the vocabulary of dance and sequences of dance movements the syntax of the vocabulary. The critical element of Bannerman’s article deals with the quality of the performance based on theoretical issues in postmodern dance. The quality of the performance of the final task in this action research project was the selected indicator of the success of the process.

Dance has a unique role in a boys’ only environment. Spontaneous physical energy, dramatic expression of the messages conveyed in dance, attention to details of choreography and an appreciation of the challenge of staging traditional dance, which invites audience participation and improvisation, in a theatre where the audience does not participate in the dance, are the qualities of the learning experience, which Reichert and Hawley (2009) refer to as having “transitivity” (p. 39). The authors note that these aspects related to the learning experience, “arouse and hold student interest” (p. 39). They appeal to boys and inspire them to participate in

gumboot dance. Once understood and mastered, these skills can be transferred to communication and connectivity in all personal relationships.

The dance team's relationship with the teacher is critical for effective learning. As observed and investigated by Andrew Martin (2003), "Particularly critical to students' engagement and motivation in a particular subject was their relationship with their teacher" (p. 54). The challenge of making a traditional dance genre presentable on stage for non-participative audiences influenced my decision to adopt a methodology which guarantees standard execution of the gumboot dance and the retention of the inherent style of the dance. Boys are given equal opportunities to contribute to the dance within this methodology. Furthermore, authenticity is crucial to preserving the elements of transitivity which appeal to the boys.

### **Research Context**

Durban Preparatory High School is one of the oldest state schools for boys in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa. Since its establishment in 1910 in Morningside, Durban, changes in the demographics of the local population and political climate, have made it possible to accept boys from the greater Durban area. At present, boys from Grade 0 to Grade 7 travel from within a 45km radius of the school to attend daily classes and co-curricular activities. The school enjoys the support of the Governing Body, the DPHS Educational Trust and the DPHS Association.

The DPHS Vision is to "prepare our boys for life." This is realized by providing, "a unique, balanced education and fulfilling experience within a nurturing environment, founded on the school's guiding principles of integrity and respect for self and others." The school's vision, together with one of the cornerstones of the Prep experience - "Fresh ideas, traditional values" - prompted me to look at the action research model. (DPHS, 2016)

The group chosen to participate in this action research project was the gumboot dance team, comprising of 19 Grade 6 and 7 learners, who at the time of this project were 12 or 13 years old. These boys came from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds.

Regular weekly rehearsal time was scheduled in the co/extra-curricular programme. This guaranteed time for group work. Individual and small group interviews were done during the school day at mutually agreed times. It was hoped that improving collaborative skills could

empower these boys to rehearse, choreograph new dances and perform willingly with a common purpose and goal.

Parents and guardians gave written permission for the boys to participate in the project. To ensure anonymity all boys are referred to as 'participants' in the project. Visual material gathered during the project does not mention participants by name.

### **The Action**

At the beginning of the third school term the gumboot dance team was briefed on their role in the action research project. Boys were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. They agreed that the success of the project would be based on their honesty and willingness to participate in all activities.

The action research approach was ideal as it promotes positive working relationships between all participants. As the researcher and catalyst, I was able to begin working from the current successful platform of the gumboot team in performance and community workshops, to create conditions and generate activities that could be productively applied to address the problems observed within the current team dynamic.

Each weekly rehearsal created a hubbub of discussion, Responses to interventions ranged from surprise to frustration to sheer delight. Many team members lingered after the rehearsals to make journal entries with a sense of urgency.

Interventions included the following activities:

- Team tasks which were completed with no verbal communication.
- The creation of a wall of Post-it notes in response to a demonstration of the prevalent working dynamic of the team. The boys' voices expressed what they observed in the demonstration. The wall became a point of interest among all boys who work in the Music Room.
- Mindshift – breathing activities which required focus on, and awareness of, personal space.
- Turn and Talk - How to talk to each other purposefully. One activity was inspired by the use of a mind map to direct verbal communication strategies.

- Mastery - The team was inspired by outstanding examples of gumboot dances in “African Footprint-The Musical”.
- Self-assessment - learning through the arts. The final task involved the creation of a new dance to celebrate the tenure of retiring Headmaster, Mr Hank Pike. The dance was performed at the Headmaster’s Dinner.

This strategy of modelling and guided practice followed by boys’ collaborative practice had the potential to empower gumboot dance team members to creatively strategize and embrace dance perspectives individually and in their respective roles as team members.

Gumboot dancing is a team effort. Boys are drawn to the tactile, bold dance steps. They enjoy creating and performing the strong rhythms inherent in the dance genre. Soloists and leaders (referred to as callers) emerge as they develop confidence through the execution of the team effort. Boys are drawn to this powerful, visual dance form knowing that their dance skills can be developed within the team. Every boy has the opportunity to be recognized as a star performer. This is the appeal of being a gumboot dancer. This is a unique, acceptable extra-curricular activity within the peer group.

### **Data Collection**

Collection of data for this action research project was qualitative. The “Look” phase, in which participants are observed whilst engaging in tasks and activities, formed the nucleus for the gathering of data in this project (Stringer, 2014). All observations were captured on video and in photographs because, as Stringer and many others assert, “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Questionnaires, journals and interviews were also used to gather data.

Participants completed an initial questionnaire at the beginning of the project, another midway through the project and a final questionnaire at the conclusion of the project.

In their journals, the boys shared personal observations, thoughts, feelings and opinions about the activities of the project. These were handed in whenever entries were made. I returned journals promptly to enable boys to make spontaneous entries which reflected their perceptions of the tasks in which they were engaged.

Individual, small group and whole group interviews were convened to direct focus on specific interventions.

## **Data Analysis**

Each participant was assigned a code name. All individual responses to questionnaires, in journals and in interviews were transcribed using the boy's own words. This is a time-consuming method, but is essential to ensure that boys' responses are recorded accurately. It strengthens the action research project's "study trail" by providing the actual data to which the action researcher is responding. Each transcript was coded to allow for the inclusion of further material provided by individual participants in the course of the project. All transcripts included observations made in the video footage of dance activities at each intervention.

Qualitative data collection and analysis ran parallel as the project progressed. This method of formative analysis was followed by summative analysis (Shenton, 2004). On completion of each set of transcripts, patterns of behaviour and themes were identified.

Categories initially were based on a "looks right/feels right" basis. These categories emerged from the boys' use of language and my understanding, as the action research facilitator, of the written responses. These categories were based on dance activities and the observed responses supported by video footage of each intervention.

Determining the essence of each category in order to refine categories and gain an in-depth understanding of the properties of each category became clear on weekly analysis of the material completed. A data dictionary, consisting of codes and categories which defined the focus of themes covered in activities, was generated as the material was recorded in transcripts.

On completion of the interventions, data collected was sorted into concept webs. Further analysis of this data was then linked with the literature cited in my Literature Review.

## **Discussion of Results**

Four themes emerged in my analysis of the qualitative data collected during my action research project. The team received explicit instructions through modelling and guided practice. Boys worked in pairs or groups of various sizes, learning, discovering and implementing collaborative and independent practices.

### **Eliminating sources of dissension**

Verbal communication was identified as the prime source of dissension. The team members' responses to the elimination of verbal communication indicated their recognition of the potential



effectiveness of collaborative skills. Following “Warm up Activities” suggested by educators at University Park Campus School (UPCS) during which no verbal communication was allowed, they acknowledged the positive outcomes of eliminating verbal interference in the dance process.

Boys acknowledged that to successfully complete tasks without talking, “Everybody has to interact to make them work, not just the leader”. Their focus on the task at hand required that they did not allow themselves to be “affected by their surroundings,” including the negative responses of two of the appointed group leaders. A strong recommendation from one dancer was; “I believe this kind of learning is very successful because people cannot backchat... It gets them to focus and actually get the work done properly and then they execute it properly.” Another boy expressed his personal view: “I think we should collaborate and dance without talking.”

Expressive team members who felt compelled to verbalize whilst teaching a dance found the removal of verbal communication, in one boy’s words, “intensely hard.”

### **Mindshift**

Significant mindshift changes emerged, following a number of interventions. Consensus prevailed for the optimal functioning of the dance team. Prerequisites for a meaningful dance experience were the acceptance of everyone’s need to be physically comfortable in the working environment, an acknowledgement of the spectrum of comfortable spaces for individuals, and an awareness of personal space required by individuals to immerse themselves in a creative process.

When team members were grouped according to their complementary strengths, following the model of Hammond at UPCS, spatial difficulties were balanced with coordination problems as the boys resourcefully relied on each other to master challenging dance steps and rhythms.

Embracing the contributions of all team members provided affirmation of the skills of an introverted team leader. His active participation, improved self-esteem and confidence empowered him to make significant contributions to the choreography and performance of the final team task.

Team spirit improved as boys shared future dreams and aspirations. A sense of common purpose prevailed in discussions, which included vocational goals for individuals and for the team.

### **New perspectives in collaboration, inspired by performance**

Close observation of performances, following boys' exposure to examples of mastery, revealed previously unsurpassed energy, pace and style in the boys' performance. The most significant example of "mastery" was a superb professional performance by Noel Ndumiso, gumboot dance captain and choreographer for "African Footprint." This prompted the Prep dance captain to challenge my strategy of sharing noteworthy examples of gumboot dance performances. His honesty and direct challenge clearly indicated that I was an equal member of the action research cohort, and as such was expected to share "the juicy stuff" with the team.

The choreography of new dance sequences included elevated dance steps, previously unattainable by this team. The team member responsible for successfully choreographing and integrating one of these moves added a journal entry exclaiming, "At the end of our dance, 8 other boys and I made a human net for my friend to jump into!"

Mutual respect for dance partners, sensitivity to individual skill levels and trust in the moment of successful execution of these difficult steps raised the team's performance to a new level.

Learned collaborative skills synchronized with inspiration from this outstanding example of the gumboot dance genre empowered the team members to explore new, difficult sequences which were successfully utilized in new choreography. A proud team member concluded, "If we practice, we can perform in the same perfect harmony."

### **Embracing new perspectives**

Close study of the boys' interaction with each other revealed their "mastering of self-assessment [and the] ... deepening of independent learning through the arts" (Hean as cited in Edutopia, 2016). "Deep, Meaningful Chats" abbreviated to "DMCs" was the term coined by the team captain for the most effective way to embrace and implement the collaboration skills learned in the action research project. The development of this "Verbal Critique Contract" provided a platform from which each student was able "to realize that they have a valid, strong opinion and that they can articulate that opinion to one another" ((Hean as cited in Edutopia, 2016).

Criteria for DMCs as proposed and accepted by the team:

- DMCs are to be conducted prior to the introduction of new materials or choreography.
- Each person must talk in turn and bring energy and ideas into the circle.

- Open discussions must acknowledge individual differences and incorporate them into the team work.
- Disagreement must be voiced precisely with specific reasons provided for the disagreement.
- “If criticism is personal it must offer constructive options for the group.”
- A new theme or idea must “work with the essence of the dance.”
- A themed “dance off” must be conducted in preparation for a new move or dance sequence. Consensus will determine the inclusion or exclusion of the new material.

These criteria are attainable “by trust, mostly, and respect.” This viewpoint was substantiated by the boys’ motivation to respect the agreement. It recognizes the need to revise, reassess and rework material to produce the best product. This method, in which constant assessment and revising of materials with a view to make the best contribution possible, is transferable “in any walk of life” (Hean as cited in Edutopia, 2016).

The boys’ voices express their appreciation of the value of the learned collaborative skills. They have successfully implemented them and continue using them to enhance the gumboot dance experience at Durban Prep.

### **Conclusion**

Newly acquired skills in collaboration and teamwork, paired with creativity and imagination inspired the gumboot dance team to create the final product in this project - a dance in honour of retiring Headmaster, Mr Hank Pike. Every aspect of creating a new dance was enhanced by the boys’ finely tuned skills. Their research into significant events during Mr Pike’s 25 years of service at DPHS substantiated the messages shared in the dance. Creation of new dance steps and choreography of new sequences were all based on Deep Meaningful Chats. The process of achieving consensus within the creative process determined the production of an outstanding final product in this cycle.

The performance of a new dance with distinct messages, the inclusion of new dance steps, choreography created by every team member, improved performance style and the mastery of consensus in the creation of the dance, illustrate new perspectives embraced by the boys in this action research group.

The audience and the guest of honour, Hank Pike (retiring Headmaster DPHS), applauded the messages encapsulated in the final product of this action research cycle:

The manner in which the team was able to express and highlight some of the defining elements of my 'away- from- school' life viz. my interest in sailing, paddling and the outdoors (via reference to my beloved 4x4 vehicle, "Usuzi"), using the gumboot dance genre so effectively will remain forever in my treasure trove of memories. With so much of Africa in us all, and together with my interaction with the many peoples and cultures of our country, the respectful, entertaining, amusing and energetic message conveyed in the performance resonated strongly within me! (HGD Pike)

Boys delight in expressing their joy, sorrow, fear, and frustration in gumboot dance. The steps can be executed by any participant who chooses to join the dance as traditional African dance genres are synthesized with contemporary urban dance genre. The traditional call and response format, leader calls, dance team responds, provides a platform for dancers to follow or challenge the leader. The collaborative, creative, innovative, and critical thinking skills required to successfully confront individual and team challenges are those that empower boys to be effective 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens.

I am proud to acknowledge the boys' superb utilization of these new perspectives. It has been a remarkable experience exploring and implementing the concept of collaboration in a teaching environment – leading to an amazing result which transcends the boundaries of the performing arts.

Beyond the activities of the gumboot dance team, I am thrilled every time I encounter a team member interacting in another group, Marimba Band, Choir, Debating Team or classroom activity, embracing his newly found collaborative skills and encouraging others to work effectively for the mutual benefit of all participants in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Implications for Future Research**

DPHS staff support and enjoy the performances and community work of the gumboot dance team. In my presentations to staff groups in preparation for the annual conference in Baltimore, I

will encourage them to participate in future action research projects within their respective disciplines.

I have agreed to share these successful findings with DHS (Durban High School) for the benefit of boys in the high school who have access to the new Seabrooke Music Facility. My inspiration to share with colleagues is reflected in this advice: “Teaching boys effectively is like a dance: While someone leads, and another follows, the process is a partnership united in common purpose.” (Reichert and Hawley, 2009)

### **Reflection Statement**

My education philosophy is supported constantly by what I learn from the boys. The action research model has changed my approach to the manner in which I communicate with the boys. It has built levels of trust and honesty together with a new understanding of hard work and dedication required to master the dance steps and perfect dances for performance. Respect for every participant, boys who are team members, teaching staff and professional dancers, enables everyone to work in a truly symbiotic relationship. I teach with new vision and inspiration in and beyond the classroom.

To the “DPHS family,” who have supported this initiative, Kasia Vosloo who worked through every rehearsal with me, Grant Phipson, my mentor, and my own family for their unwavering support, I express my heartfelt thanks.

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