


Wellbeing

Dance has been an integral part of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture for millennia. People continue to perform dances and describe the role it plays in their identity and sense of wellbeing. The following article provides more information on this.

CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures

CONTENT AREAS


 HPE

 History

 The Arts (Dance)

GENERAL CAPABILITIES

 Personal and Social Capability

 Intercultural Understanding

 Ethical Understanding

 Critical and Creative Thinking

KEY CONCEPT

Wellbeing [is a state] in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.

World Health Organisation

SUPPORTING CONCEPT

› transformation

GUIDING QUESTION

How can dance be understood as contributing to a person's identity and wellbeing?

This printed material is **to be used with Dance – a Living Cultures multimedia curriculum resource** that can be found at www.theorb.tas.gov.au

The Living Cultures Dance resource and this supplementary printed material have been designed to foster culturally responsive practice when learning about Tasmanian Aboriginal Histories and Cultures.

Introduction

As soon as we put our skins on and our ochre, it takes you to another place. And that's very emotional - very, very emotional. The traditional practices such as dance are so significant to not only your health and wellbeing, your spiritual being, but most aspects of your life.

Sinsa Mansell, 2017

Sinsa is talking about how her identity as a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman is being enacted through dance and the sense of wellbeing that she experiences when performing.



Students at St Helens, 2017 | Image: Dncstrct Pty Ltd

Dancing your Identity

Dance has been an integral part of identity for Tasmanian Aboriginal people for millennia.

Records made by early European observers also reveal the interconnectedness of dance and identity.

George Augustus Robinson noted on his journeys, including the so-called Friendly Mission (1829-1834), that while there were many similarities in cultural practices across the different tribes, it was the uniqueness of the dances that often demonstrated the differences in group identity.

The Port Davey natives have the same customs as the Brune aborigines in the burning of their dead, manufacture of baskets, relics of the dead [etc]. All their females had three scars or cicatrices on the back of each leg, about the middle of the calf, which is peculiar to themselves. Their dances are quite different, and require great exertion and agility. Dancing they call true.de.cum. They bound from one position to another.

Legs, arms, head and every part of the body is in motion. Their eyes also are made to act their part and at the same time they keep up a song which regulates their motions. They are certainly the best dancers of any aborigines I have yet seen.

5 April 1830

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 175

Other early European observers also documented a range of different and often unique dances. James Kelly, a sailor and sealer, recorded details of a dance he observed in Banks Strait – located between mainland Tasmania and Cape Barren Island – being performed after the capture of some seals.

The whole mob of them – about three hundred in number – formed a line in three division, the men and women forming two of them and the children another. *Tolobunannah* then gave the signal to commence the dance and it was a most singular one. The women in the centre division began a song, and joining their hands, formed a circle, dancing

round the heap of dead seals ... The men then commenced a sort of sham fight with spears and waddies, dancing afterwards round the heap of seals, and sticking their spears into them as if they were killing them.

Kelly c 1818 cited in Roth 1968: 140

DISCUSSION QUESTION

- › What do these sources tell us about how dance varies to capture unique experience in different contexts?

Belonging and Being

We hear from Tasmanian Aboriginal people that family and a sense of belonging and kinship are central to identity and wellbeing. People talk about the interconnections between self, family, community, dance and wellbeing.

I am so grateful for the relationships and the elders and the aunties and the experiences on country, all of the community events, we have a really strong sense of community here so we're very, very lucky.

Sinsa Mansell, 2017

A small group of us cousins got together and we decided that we really wanted to educate ourselves and speak fluently as much as we could. And so it started off with creating songs out of palawa kani and this was in the early 2000s. And then from that around the

fireplace we decided to create movement to go with those songs ... one of our main focusses was creating stories of the native animals that belong to our country here in Tasmania. When we formed, we started off just dancing, and that was just for ourselves. And then we identified what we're actually doing. So number one, we are actually keepers of ceremony, and we're keeping those ceremonies alive, passing them on to our children.

Sinsa Mansell, 2017



Sinsa Mansell and students at St Helens, 2017 | Image: Dncstrct Pty Ltd

I was brought up in such a beautiful environment. We had it [culture] so much around us, being at Eddystone Point, larapuna, that's where my sixth great grandfather was – *Mannalargenna*. It's like with Dad, he's just done so well with us kids, and without him we wouldn't really know our culture. And it's a big part of this [dance], like knowing who you are, I think. He's just a role model I think, I look up to him so much. He's created my life pretty much.

Mitchem Everett, 2017

Mitchem's in that next process now of teaching his brothers, so then they can learn, and then we'll obviously teach other members in the community and that as well, so it gets stronger and stronger and builds that sense of belonging and that connection, not only to that animal but to our country and to our culture.

Craig Everett, 2017



Craig Everett and sons at *larapuna*, 2016 | Image: Dncstrct Pty Ltd



Danny Gardner and Manella at Risdon Cove, 2017 | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

So Manella, we do this dance because the two animals in it are our special animals, they're a part of our creation. It's the emu, and the kangaroo, okay? The first Aboriginal man, he climbed on, was created as a kangaroo, so we was kangaroos like this.

Danny Gardner, 2017

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What do these quotes tell us about identity, family, kinship and dance?
- › Who or what do you think is included in a kinship system?
- › How is belonging being described here?

Identity, Transformation and Wellbeing

People talk about their experiences of developing their identity, the transformations that occur when they perform a dance and the interconnections between dance, identity and wellbeing.

When I've worked with kids that are first time performers, the first question I ask them when they're finished is, "Would you do that again, like right now? Do you feel like you want to go out and do that again?"

It's really hard to not go, "Okay, let's do a couple more dances," because the feeling is amazing. It's no different from someone going to the gym and releasing endorphins, but in our case it's more around having that connection, and you feel it back.

Danny Gardner, 2017

It's no secret that mental health is an issue. It's not widely talked about. I think from experience I've found myself quite reluctant to talk to people, but when I have, I've never felt judged or worried by it. And I find through dance and connecting – dance isn't just non-stop dancing around – you can have a little dance and sit down around a fire and just yarn. I find a lot of our cultural activities can be very therapeutic, quite relaxing.

Danny Gardner, 2017

The traditional practices such as dance is so significant to not only your health and wellbeing, your spiritual being, but most aspects of your life.

Sinsa Mansell, 2017

You seem to notice people when they're really connected and they're dancing. There are no outside thoughts, no influences at that moment when I'm dancing, and it's just like someone surfing, when they're surfing a wave, they'd have that same feeling of there's no thoughts on the outside world, you're just stuck in that moment.

Danny Gardner, 2017

I mean, it's hard to explain. Like you feel the dance, like so I get really embarrassed speaking and stuff, and I used to get bullied about being Aboriginal in school, in primary school. And when I'm dancing, none of that [matters], I just don't think about anything, it just all goes naturally, yeah, it just really overcomes me.

Mitchem Everett, 2017

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › How is dance an important way to stay healthy in the mind as well as the body?
- › What transformations take place when people dance?
- › What do these statements reveal about an Aboriginal sense of identity and wellbeing?
- › How do Aboriginal people continue to express their unique ways of being, knowing, thinking and doing through dance?

www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures/dance/teacher-drawer

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