

# Assessment and evaluation of dance-movement therapy programs for children with intellectual disabilities

Kim Dunphy and Sue Mullane

## Abstract:

This presentation will introduce a tool for assessment and evaluation in dance movement therapy programs for children with special needs and intellectual disabilities. An integrated experience of theory, research and practice will be provided; the theoretical presentation being complemented by practical application using video material and an interactive discussion. This workshop will be primarily intended for dance-movement therapists working with children who have special needs, and/or intellectual and physical disabilities, but could also be of interest to those working with adults from similar populations.

## Description:

### Introduction

This presentation will introduce a tool for assessment and evaluation in dance movement therapy programs for children with special needs and intellectual disabilities. This framework was developed by dance specialists Kim Dunphy and Jenny Scott as a way of assessing clients' progress and evaluating the effectiveness of community based dance programs, including dance therapy for people with intellectual disabilities. It uses a range of methods for collecting data, including LMA based observations by group leaders, as well as feedback from participants and carers. It was first published in 2003, in Dunphy and Scott's book *Freedom to Move: movement and dance for people with intellectual disabilities*.

### Literature review

The development of this tool drew on models applied by other dance therapists or specialists for populations that had some related characteristics. All three of these models used LMA-based observations by the group leader as the major data source. Dance and physio-therapist Jane Guthrie used a range of tools to assist with goal setting and measurement of functional outcomes for her clients with Acquired Brain Injury (1999). To assess progress in dance therapy with a young man with autism, dance and speech therapist Alice Owen devised a Movement Observation Scale to record capacity for specific spontaneous movements. She also applied Samuels and Chaiklin's Movement Observation Scale to assess his movement quality and Davis' Movement Diagnostic Scale to assess distorted movement patterns (Owen 1999). Sally Fitt's (1980) 'Simplified Movement Behaviour Analysis' for programs for people with disabilities used scales of Laban's effort qualities of time, space and force to measure participants' mastery of basic movement skills.

While these ideas provided some relevant starting points for the development of a tool, they were not completely suitable for the authors' context. None were developed specifically for clients with intellectual disability, or for community or educational settings. They relied entirely on data generated through observations of group leaders, and did not allow for any contribution from participants or other stakeholders. None considered issues beyond movement quality.

Since the publication of *Freedom to Move*, there have been significant developments in research in dance movement therapy that inform the current project. Flaum Cruz and Berrol's book on research methods in dance/movement therapy (2004) includes several very relevant chapters; issues of reliability and validity in use of movement observations and scales (Flaum Cruz and Koch), evaluation research (Flaum Cruz) and mixing qualitative and quantitative methods (Berrol).

Abbeysack and Bolster (2009) describe the application of FAM, a movement assessment tool devised for psychiatric populations that they applied with clients who had developmental disabilities. FAM and the model presented in this paper share some similarities in terms of scales measured, but they differ significantly in philosophical underpinning. The current proposal takes more of a life enhancement approach, and is more closely aligned with the social model of disability that considers attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder full and effective participation of people with a disability within society (UN 2007), rather than the medical model of disability, where treatment is provided to address clients' deficiencies.

A recent article by Australian music therapists (Jacobsen and Langan, 2009) introduces an assessment tool for music therapy in special education that incorporates educational outcomes. The tool includes the categories of communication, initiation, response, movement, social interaction, emotional expression, listening and decision making, many of which match quite closely with categories in the present model. This seems a successful development, with high take-up by professionals, being used by 90% of surveyed music therapists. This indicates the likely usefulness of a tool with similar purpose for dmts.

### **Introducing the tool**

The current framework was developed for a range of dance and dance therapy programs, in community and educational settings. It is based on a Laban framework, measuring achievement against Laban principles that value individuals' access to a full range of movement experiences. But it also takes a more wholistic approach, considering other aspects of participation in dance programs that the authors and their clients valued, i.e. opportunities for and enaction of creative expression, social interaction, physical fitness and community involvement. It places importance on a variety of measures of clients' participation, particularly their enjoyment of the program as indicated through verbal, non-verbal and behavioural feedback, and other methods including carer reports about verbal and non-verbal feedback. The tool was intended to assist program leaders with planning and goal setting, to reflect on the progress of clients and to be able to report to other professionals, funders and program managers on changes as a result of dance program participation. At the time of publication, it had not had thorough trials by the authors.

### **The tool in application**

Recently dance movement therapist Sue Mullane began to use this tool in her program in a large, urban special developmental school in Melbourne, Australia. Sue wished to assess student's participation in a dance movement therapy program comprised of weekly group sessions. This program catered to the full school population of 152 students aged 5-18 years with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities and other associated needs. Two particular requirements of the tool were that it garner sufficient breadth and depth of data about students' expression through improvised movement, and that it be efficient in use. Further, the information collected needed to be considered by the school leadership and regular class teachers (with non-specialist dance understanding) as relevant to students' wider educational plans, and compliant with school and Education Department assessment frameworks.

An action research project was instigated to trial the checklist's suitability for this school setting, using a case study approach with a ten year old boy. This project confirmed that the tool was a good fit for the dance movement therapy program in the school, and that the information collected could also be meaningful for a class teacher. The class teacher involved in the study confirmed that she could and would use the descriptive data profiled in the checklist if it was accessible during critical planning and reporting phases in the year.

The checklist met the Departmental requirement for good student assessment in its use of multiple measures of information congruent with the learning context. It seemed suitable for

use when considering concepts currently prioritized by the Education Department of, 'assessment *for* learning' and 'assessment *of* learning'. These processes are undertaken by an outside observer and occur, in the first instance, while students are engaged in the process of learning and the second, at the end of a learning process or period of learning. The tool also has the potential to be used to address the Departmental notion of 'assessment *as* learning', which emphasizes the process of learning as it is experienced by the student, requiring them to reflect on and monitor their own progress to inform future learning goals.

As the tool makes use of descriptive indicators of student engagement, it challenges the Department's reliance on qualitative standards to indicate what students know and are able to do at certain milestones along a learning continuum. There is scope to explore endorsement by the school of the checklist's use of description alone as a legitimate aspect of assessment.

As a result of this project, several modifications were made to the original tool. Terminology used in some of the indicators of measurement and scale ratings was altered for greater clarity and relevance for non-dance specialists. The category concerning performing skills was deleted, leaving eight categories of assessment that were relevant to the school program;

- a sense of fun and enjoyment
- connection with the here and now
- connection and communication with others
- body awareness, mastery and expansion of movement range
- fitness and co-ordination
- the ability to relax
- connection between thought, imagination and body
- development of initiative, decision making and leadership skills.

The tool was redesigned as an electronic spreadsheet to facilitate plotting of ratings as a graph, enabling change over time to be recorded simply and quickly, and for ratings not to be influenced by previous observations. This adaptation makes the tool particularly suitable for teachers and therapists who need reporting strategies that are effective and time efficient, and that provide information that is comprehensible and meaningful to other professionals.

### **Practical exercise and discussion**

This workshop will introduce the tool, providing participants with a practical exercise in its application. Analysis of video material of children with an intellectual disability participating in a dance movement therapy program will be used, and/or observation of role playing by workshop participants.

This exercise will be complemented by a discussion of issues around assessment and evaluation for dance movement therapists working with this client group. The workshop presenters will contribute their experience, and open the conversation up with delegates around topics;

- introducing dmt principles and the evaluation framework to senior staff and school (or other organization) management
- harmonizing dmt assessment with other assessment frameworks, especially those in schools
- engaging non-specialist staff in the assessment process
- coping with time, venue and class size limitations, and
- reporting to parents, especially those from different cultural backgrounds.

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