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Self-Designed Experience

Reflection for “Exploring the Benefits of Flow Arts”

My experience turned out to be everything I could ever imagine and more. The point of this project was, after researching different kinds of flow arts and how they’ve been used through history, to go out and do fieldwork at a flow arts festival – Kinetic Fire festival to be specific. This festival is unique in that people venture into the grounds from around the world to attend the (over 200) workshops Kinetic has to offer, which literally last from morning all the way until dusk, when you would think everyone would take a break, but instead all the attendees light up their flow props in a sea of trance-like fire spinning Zen. The depth of these people’s love for learning, movement, and health gave me a new gusto for life. Never had I been surrounded by so many people working towards such positive intentions- all while living exclusively in the moment! While at Kinetic, part of my project included observing and videotaping people in action. Little did I know that everywhere I turned I would see pockets of people, each with different kinds of flow props (many that I had never heard of or seen before), instructing each other and playing, enjoying the movement, moral support, and sunshine. Plenty of people with whom I spoke had never been to a festival before or had just started flowing that day – and the next person over would be a world-famous YouTube star who could juggle seven knives on fire. What a wonderful environment this was, where everyone was treated equally and yet one could ogle the massive skillset of next-door camp-neighbors without shame.

My experience also entailed interviewing people about why they enjoyed flow arts, what the benefits were, and how they came to be at a flow arts festival. During this process I also wrote some journal entries about how all of this made me feel and what I was learning from these folks. Perhaps the most stunning and significant part for me was observing the meditative and performing faces of people in the “flow zone”- a kind of trance brought about from repetitive, geometric motion and exploration of intrinsic rhythm and spiritual engagement, as well as personal expression. Going from daylight workshops to the intense, tribal-esque vibrations and fire-flinging evening hours showed me the reason why all these people practice so much and contrasted the feeling of a daytime to nighttime spin-jam (two totally different experiences). The passion and soothing emotions emanating from these people overtook me and launched me into a world of imagination and endlessness, carrying me through the night and into the wee hours of the morning, all the while catching the eye of my curious camera. The expectations I had in my proposal were definitely met through my experience at Kinetic; my intentions were to gather footage and experience from doing fieldwork at this festival and that I did, plus some. I actually got to perform with the band (named Manitoa) that I toured and danced with all summer while at Kinetic, so my experience expanded in that, after observing all the wonderful things happening, I got to dance onstage, looking down at the gigantic number of people spinning fire.

With the learning outcome “Possesses ability to embrace contradictions and integrate alternate, divergent, or contradictory perspectives” as one of my objectives, I have made plenty of progress in my time spent at Kinetic and at the numerous other festivals and shows I performed at this summer, inquiring of different people how they became interested in flow arts as well as their preferred methods of flowing. I did notice that people have different perspectives of why flowing is awesome, or which prop makes them feel the best. For some people (including myself, I’ve found), dancing with no props at all gives us the utmost feeling of freedom and expression, whereas others feel timid or restrained without a prop. For them the prop is the key to their expression, connection with others, and soul. The gist of this topic is that flow, a more abstract entity, is the same and yet different for us all – just like awakening the third eye in yoga. We all have a preference of HOW to get there, and what to use along the way, but we all crave the sense of unity and alignment when the movement “just feels right”.

Another outcome that I had, “Possesses a well-developed awareness of theories and methods in the field,” required me to gather information from various groups of flow artists. Although I was unable to hoop with the “HoopCats” club on campus, due to their infrequent meeting times, I actually had many unique experiences at the Cincinnati Circus earlier this summer, where I met a broad array of intense, acrobatic people who wholeheartedly engage in all different (many dangerous and scary) types of flow. One example of dangerous but freeing movement is the flying trapeze, which upon being hired into the circus in April, I had a chance to do quite frequently, although I could never really shake the feeling of “I could die doing this”. Despite the fears and vertigo climbing up the ladder, the “whoosh!” as my swinging body zoomed through the air brought me all kinds of exhilaration and excitement, as well as serenity in the moment. In all honesty I never wanted to come down. Obviously the circus members who actually perform this in shows and practice without safety lines every day feel the flow while they swing, otherwise they would never want to commit to such a dangerous activity. The thrill of the flow and of succeeding at a skill not yet mastered drives these people to do the nearly impossible. In addition to the circus, where people hooped, spun poi, staff, juggling, knife-throwing, diabolo, aerial arts, and countless others, I also spent time with members of the Cincinnati Flow Arts Tribe, such as my project advisor Dawn Ziegler, a talented “nunchaku” enthusiast, watching them flow and discussing how it makes them feel. Between all of these interactions, my eyes opened wide in response to the array of different skillsets. Although when I designed this project I knew that I enjoyed hula hooping and dancing and that many other forms of flow were out there, I had no idea of the vastness of style and technique and the collective energy that flow arts have to offer in today’s world.

To inform to my experiential learning work, I relied on the readings described in my proposal: an in-depth web article titled "The Flow Arts," which detailed all the distinctions between different flow props as well as historical context regarding meditative flow movement. This reading was beneficial to me in that it brought me more awareness into the world of flow, and simply allowed me to fathom, before stepping into the festival grounds myself, the most dangerous and awe-inspiring props that people dare to wield. The other website article that I explored, "Top 10 Tools of the Flow Arts," was useful much in the same way as the aforementioned article, and got even more specific with describing props. With this knowledge I definitely felt more ready to go out in the field and experiment with different props instead of just hooping all the time. Finally, watching the documentary *Flow Affair, the Evolution of Flow Arts* really opened my mind to how flow affects all different kinds of people, and based on the historical context and cultural/socioeconomic conditions, has specific meaningfulness and relevance to those who participate in flowing. Watching this film also helped me make a connection to how clubbing and partying can actually be conducive to developing a whole new skillset and/or art form, just like the subject of this documentary. I connected him to my own life because I remember last year when I did not know many people yet, I would go clubbing downtown and bring my light-up hula hoop in order to get a great workout and performance-type experience all while engaging recreationally. It’s wonderful to realize that passion and entertainment can meld into something seamless like it did for him. Ultimately, these three resources aided me in gaining a deeper understanding of the extent to which flow can reach people all around the world and in unique ways, while strengthening my flow-vocabulary.

Integrating what I learned from this experience into my life has been almost effortless, because of how natural it felt to be immersed in a flow-arts environment all summer, and especially at Kinetic Fire. The major, most fundamental connection that I have drawn between this experience and others in the classroom and beyond is that I am limitless, just like everyone else. The only inhibitions we hold ourselves to are invisible when we accept that learning is a process that takes time and diligence- something that is supremely applicable in the context of my daily ballet classes. Although frustrations can consume our souls when we try desperately and fail (I fail countless times on a daily basis), it is best to acknowledge that this does not mean we are incapable – it merely means we haven’t found the most efficient route yet. In a literal and quite tangible sense, a flaming hula hoop to the head doesn’t feel very good-and can even burn and destroy the body…and yet I watched hundreds of people flinging fire on and around their bodies with a look of peace spread across their faces. They didn’t achieve this on the first try, just like the picturesque Sugar Plum Fairy couldn’t pirouette like a goddess the first time she put a ballet slipper on, or even fifteen years into her training. Ultimately, the concept of infinity allures and beckons me into a world where I can create my own reality and yet be completely grounded and useful to society, and this study of flow arts only strengthened this conviction.

So far, I have shared my learning with others by showing everyone I know and who I can connect with online my video compilation of the footage taken at Kinetic. I constructed this presentation in a way that I consider engaging enough and rapid enough to spark an interest in someone who has never associated with flow arts before. When I present this project at TUC, I hope to reach even more people who I wouldn’t have been able to reach through YouTube, Facebook, or email, and who are even more likely to have never heard of flow arts before. The experience of sharing my learning with others is fulfilling in that I see that there was an even higher purpose for me to explore this movement- to share with, and ultimately make happy, as many people as possible, be them strangers or close friends. In the end, my happiness means nothing if the entire world quakes in misery around me. I want everyone else to feel the benefits and soothing effects of flow for themselves, and by watching my video, I feel confident that people genuinely become happier and more enlightened in understanding flow.