

Lessons from learning a 1000-year-old art form through disruptions

“What even now?”, my cousin asked in disbelief.

It has been around 18 months since the pandemic induced lockdown, and I had just informed her that my dance was going to be telecast on a YouTube channel.

“I had no idea you would still be into it,” she finished.

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I have been passionate about dancing from an early age. To nurture this further, my parents had me enrolled me in Bharatnatyam classes. For context, Bharatnatyam is an Indian classical dance form which originated in South India. This dance form goes back centuries and is typically trained in the form of *guru shishya parampara* (tradition of learning through a guru). The repertoire consists of pure dance, conveying meanings through hand gestures and elements of drama/ story telling.

This dance form has been taught through generations and continues to be taught to this day. While I learnt the basics of this form in a typical classroom mode, technology has played a key role in disrupting (or upgrading) my learning journey, with each upheaval enriching the overall experience. The objective of this essay is to share some of the key disruptions in my dancing journey, my learnings from it and what are some of the dichotomies the next generation has to grapple with while designing the next education.

Disruptions in my dancing journey:

1. Technology - Birth of recorded music :

Music plays a key role in the audience’s reception of the dance performance (also called *rasa* in the dance vocabulary). While the artists of yesteryears hired live musicians for their stage performances, the birth of the recording industry allowed everyone to have copies of the music which could be played anytime, anywhere. There was lesser dependence on the availability of the musicians – which was particularly helpful, especially when for students like me, we were learning the form away from India, where musicians were far fewer. As a result, all my practices and performances were done on recorded music.

While live music has its share of advantages with a better sound experience, lesser chances of technical glitches etc., recorded music allowed this art form to be propagated across the world. The technology of recording has also evolved with time – from a studio recording to the convenience of recording on a regular smartphone at the comfort of home. The distribution of recorded music has also evolved with cassettes, CDs, and digital music.

Lesson #1: If there is scope for a better process using technology, implement it. Technology is to be viewed as a tool to create a better process.

2. Disruptions in learning (Classroom to workshop):

When I moved to India for graduate studies, I took a break from my dance lessons. After studies once I commenced working, I was looking to restart my lessons. The creative nature

of the process required that the vibes of the teacher and student match for a fulfilling learning journey. In addition, the teaching styles of individuals also vary depending on their school of dance – so even if the vibes do match, a certain degree of unlearning may be required if he/she is from a different school. Hence, I wanted to be sure whom I wanted my next guru to be.

I was living in Mumbai at the time, and specifically looking for weekend lessons given the constraints of work schedules and traffic in a metro city. While I tried convincing my earlier guru to take classes over Skype, due to her beliefs that learning can only take place face to face, she point-blank refused.

Mumbai, also being a cultural hub of its own, I took up a friend's suggestion and enrolled for workshops conducted in the city by prominent artists. They were almost always over the weekends and involved learning one item/ sequence over a day. Workshops proved to be a very collaborative space having dancers from across the country. The quality of questioning, and the diversity of interpretations for the same song/choreography was an eye opener. For example, to show the agility of a warrior, one of the choreographies involved blending martial arts and yoga along with the standard dance steps– which may have been frowned on in a typical classroom. This also helped me stay abreast in the world of dance.

It was also in one such workshop wherein I was introduced to another dance teacher, who taught Bharatnatyam and Mohiniyattam (another form of classical dance I wanted to learn), and agreed to take weekend lessons. Moreover, she was also not averse to trying out online classes.

Lesson #2: Collaboration with the right people enhances the learning experience and enriches the overall choreography.

3. Disruption in Teaching (Physical to online classes):

While the concept of online classes was still nascent at the time, during our first few lessons we tried out different platforms and realized Zoom worked the best for both of us.

The pandemic hit shortly after, and the lockdown was declared. During the lockdown, when other instructors were figuring out how to conduct online classes– we had an early head start, which she replicated for the rest of her classes. In fact, my first performance under her tutelage was also online, shortly after the second wave, prompting my cousin's response as mentioned earlier in the essay. To this day, I am continuing my lessons online from her.

Though convenient, the online mode of teaching has its challenges which could be overcome by the classroom learning approach. After the lockdown was lifted, we do a mix of online and offline classes, which allows me a certain amount of continuity in learning while meeting my other commitments.

Lesson #3: My biggest challenge was to continue lessons despite relocation to another city. Besides finding the “right” teacher, proximity was also a variable to be factored. Online

classes helped solve this problem. As written by Drucker, *When it comes to managing change, the most effective way to manage change successfully is to create it.*¹ Frequent relocation is going to be more common, and online lessons are a tool to manage that change.

As seen in the above example, the fundamentals of the dance form (the basic stances, movement, hand gestures, rhythm), are not going to change over time. However, the medium of teaching/ learning, related content and its interpretation would evolve with time. While the example was for education in the performing arts, the same applies to other forms of education. However, we are also in the age of internet, technology and climate change which brings in its own set of challenges for the next generation.

Dichotomies to consider for the next education:

1. Bringing the human connect in the age of technology:

The Harvard study on adult development followed the lives of more than 2000 people over a period of 85 years. It concluded that the happiest people, who stayed healthiest as they grew old, and those who lived the longest were people who had the warmest connections with others². In the age of social media, a technologically advanced nation has given birth to the rent-a-friend industry³. Could this be a harbinger of things to come? Going forward, the challenge is to maintain the human connection through real friendships.

Whilst the pandemic has taught organizations that remote work is always possible and was a welcome relief for corporate employees, it wreaked havoc in the world of developing minds (read middle school and below), for whom a certain level of human connection in the physical world is still required. In fact, for toddlers, development milestones were delayed due to more screentime/ lesser human interaction. On a more personal note, my son was one of the victims of this trend – he was a year old when the lockdown was declared. For the next two years, besides his parents, his human connect was always through screens. His social skills and interactions with other kids his age was non-existent. Despite living in one of the most populous cities in the most populous country, my kid was far more comfortable in front of a TV/ iPad as opposed to interacting with people. Seeing other people gave him anxiety attacks and took a while to calm him down. His development milestones were severely delayed. Once the lockdown was lifted, it required a lot of work both at school and at home to overcome his social anxiety. It took him another three years to start talking.

¹ Drucker, P.F. (2013) *Managing in the Next Society*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

² Waldinger, R. (no date) *What makes a good life? lessons from the longest study on Happiness*, Robert Waldinger: *What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness* | TED Talk. Available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness?language=en (Accessed: 30 May 2024).

³ <https://www.afar.com/magazine/the-incredibly-true-story-of-renting-a-friend-in-tokyo>

Besides interacting with other people, another challenge in the wake of Artificial intelligence (AI) is the human involvement when making decisions. Although outsourcing decision making to AI is tempting, if the consequences of such decisions could affect human beings, it is better than humans can take the final call. In applications such as war, allowing AI to make decisions is a matter of life and death and the world has witnessed it too⁴.

After all, as humans we deserve to give ourselves and others some dignity. Amidst all the technology, having the human connect and making humane decisions is a delicate balancing act.

2. Stability amidst growing mobility:

I spent my formative years in West Asia in a city called Muscat, although both my parents are from Kerala, a state in Southern India. I have studied in two different cities and worked across three countries. With such rampant mobility, which city should I be calling home? Due to the then laws in Muscat, immigrants could not own property or become citizens. My parents' hometown in India did not evoke a sense of home.

While at Muscat, my parents maintained their connection to their home through the food, music, movies, festivals, and stories. While in Muscat, they followed the customs followed by their families in India for me to emulate. At school, I interacted with my peers from diverse backgrounds and learned about their food, culture and customs. Only a stable environment would allow such learning to flourish. Drucker's "*The New Society of Organizations*" also touched on this – *Society, community and family are conserving institutions which try to maintain stability and slow change*⁵. Nevertheless, during relocation, the concept of home, and by extension self-identity is bound to change.

Although a Muslim majority nation, the Omani government provided a conducive environment for harmony - a Hindu temple was across the road from a catholic church, which was about 2 kilometers away from a mosque. Schools of various nationalities co-existed in the capital region. Growing up in a multicultural setting allowed to embrace practices from across regions, religions and pick/ choose what works best for me.

Peter Drucker was born in Vienna, moved to Germany and England for work before finally setting in USA. Josephine Baker, although born in USA found fame as a dancer in France. C.K Prahlad, another management thinker was born and raised in India, migrated to USA for career prospects and settled there. While migration is not novel, it is increasingly becoming the norm. War, higher studies, job prospects are some of the factors contributing to relocation with stability as a major motivator for relocation.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/03/israel-gaza-ai-database-hamas-airstrikes>

⁵ *What executives should remember* (2014) *Harvard Business Review*. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2006/02/what-executives-should-remember> (Accessed: 30 May 2024)

Moving forward, migration is bound to increase – within or across borders. In addition to migration, globalization has created multinational organizations whose stakeholders spread across the world. By fostering a culture of inclusivity and respect, people from different ethnicities, religions, races, genders can coexist, which in turn can bring stability – an essential ingredient to thrive in this diverse world.

3. Embracing change while being authentic:

Change is the only constant in nature. In case of change, either you adapt to it or create it (also known as innovation). According to Peter Drucker, "*The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence itself, but to act with yesterday's logic*"⁶. He goes on to write in *Managing the Non-Profit Organization* "*Listening for the signal that it is time to change is an essential skill for self-development.*"⁷ This can only be done by reading, listening to others and forming an opinion.

Connecting the dots is a key skillset which comes with practice and time. To manage change, continuous learning is required of the individual and continuous improvement with innovation is required of the organization. "*The only skill that will be important in the 21st century is the skill of learning new skills. Everything else will become obsolete over time.*"⁸ The smartest folks are the ones who can understand the signal for change early on by connecting the dots – learn new skills, work across interdependencies and move forward.

To conclude, a late professor in one of his last speeches had mentioned "Constantly upgrade yourself by learning, listen to others but form your own opinions. Moving forward you would be paid for your own opinion, and that's what creates the brand YOU.

(2232 words)

⁶ Drucker, P.F. (2009) *Innovation and entrepreneurship: Practice and principles*. HarperCollins e-Books.

⁷ Drucker, P.F. (2014) *Managing the non-profit organization: Principles and practices*. HarperCollins e-Books.

⁸ *The skill of learning new skills* (no date) FEI. Available at: <https://www.financialexecutives.org/FEI-Daily/May-2021/The-Skill-Of-Learning-New-Skills.aspx> (Accessed: 30 May 2024).

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3. TED talks (www.ted.com)
4. Wikipedia
5. The Knowledge Project with Shane Parrish