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DANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE USA  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:  
MOVING FORWARD WITH NEW INSIGHTS

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**Dance in Higher Education in the USA During the COVID-19 Pandemic:  
Moving Forward with New Insights**

**Synopsis:**

The pandemic opened a door to reimagine the socio-political significance that forced many to reconsider existing structures and procedures. New creative ideas in dance globally resulted. The utilization and exploration of contemporary techniques like Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and Countertechnique®, systems, and technologies (Motion Capture and Dance Film), gleaned new insights to further develop the pedagogical and choreographic practice. Dance education necessitated adaptations to the artistic practice that produced creative solutions and new innovative ways of working.

# **Dance in Higher Education in the USA During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Moving Forward with New Insights**

## **Abstract**

In the United States, dance professionals in higher education were faced with many challenges during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the many negative impacts, the restrictions were motivation to explore new possibilities in teaching and creating for dance in a contemporary world. The pandemic opened a door to reimagine the socio-political significance that forced many to reconsider existing structures and procedures. New creative ideas in dance globally resulted. The utilization and exploration of contemporary techniques, systems, and technologies, gleaned new insights to further develop pedagogical and choreographic practices. Dance education necessitated adaptations to artistic processes that produced creative solutions and new innovative ways of working.

## **The Influence of the Pandemic on Western Michigan University**

In January 2020, the Coronavirus became a global pandemic. As of mid-March, Governor Gretchen Whitmer of the state of Michigan, issued “Stay at Home Orders” for the entire state. Due to this, Western Michigan University (WMU) immediately shifted all in person classes to online learning. This gave faculty three days to transition their course work to the virtual learning space. Curriculum work was then offered through both synchronized and asynchronous formats and took place via the Zoom and Webex platforms. All dance technique classes were then taught from small personal spaces and created for restricted environments. However, there were many challenges during this transition to virtual learning. The lack of

campus resources left some students without the necessary technology and internet access needed to log in for all their course work. There were virtual sound delays that created limitations to the music synchronization during livestream dance technique classes. In addition, through the 2-dimensional screen, the students began to lose 3-dimensional qualities and were challenged by directions while discerning movement in their own spaces. Aside from these teaching and learning challenges, many students and faculty were also confronted with extreme personal situations during this unprecedented time.

By May of 2020, WMU was experiencing a budget crisis due to the abrupt closure of the school and loss of revenue. In response, WMU enforced emergency layoffs for staff, term, and adjunct faculty. There were early retirements introduced and highly encouraged for senior faculty to offset overall projected financial losses. The WMU Chapter of American Association of University Professors (AAUP) offered a temporary collective salary reduction for all faculty across the university, to the administration, in order to help avoid further layoffs. Furthermore, WMU froze the new hire process for the foreseeable future and research funding and travel stipends were suspended. Admissions, student mentorships, as well as Tenure & Promotion procedures were also digitalized. Some units across the university were merged to reduce operational costs. For instance, The Dance and Theatre Departments in the College of Fine Arts were merged into the School of Theatre and Dance as one unit. All summer courses were offered virtually. Throughout the remainder of the summer months, the faculty and staff participated in frequent and urgent meetings around policy changes and preparedness of potential scenarios.

Before returning to campus for the fall 2020 semester, WMU created university wide COVID-19 Policies and Procedures. Most units around the university offered their full curriculum remotely and held no in person courses during the 2020-2021 academic year. Yet, the

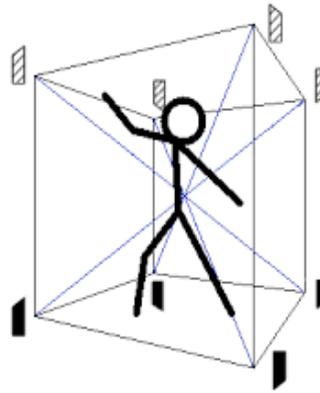
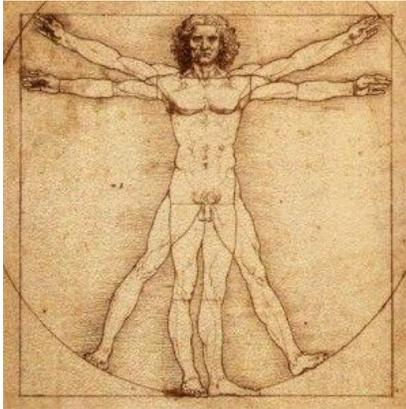
Department of Dance provided hybrid learning options. Masks were required for all indoor and outdoor spaces. Badges for Daily Health Screenings are required in order for students to participate in classes. Because of the unique nature of dance education, there were also further safety protocols put in place. 6 ft. social distancing was required across the campus but in the dance studios 10 x 10 ft. boxes were taped on the dance floors to restrict the space between dancers. All floors and barres were sanitized between classes. Thirty minutes of air flow rule was implemented between each class. The entrance and exit doors were designated for one direction of foot traffic. There was a student capacity created for each studio for all technique classes to have an additional overflow studio space which was equipped with technology for virtual streaming.

In the fall of 2021 most dance courses went back to in-person learning while some virtual/remote components remained optional. Throughout the 2021-2022 academic year, because of access to vaccines, testing, and further protocols; more restrictions on dance in higher education, such as social/physical distancing, space-limiting boxes taped on the floor, daily health screenings, and mandatory masks in all spaces, were lifted. In the spring 2022 semester, many live performances returned with limited masked in-person audiences with the option to view a recorded version of the event. At the end of the spring 2022 semester, almost all restrictions had been lifted and dance in higher education began to shift back to normalcy prior to the pandemic era.

## **Adapting the Pedagogical Approaches: Laban Movement Analysis and Countertechnique®**

Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic there was an abrupt shift to remote teaching. A variety of virtual classes for small spaces were taught that gleaned new insights and later translated back into the studio in Fall 2021 and Spring 2022. The students spent a long time dancing within restricted spaces, which significantly affected and changed their overall physical practice. A loss of spatial intent and dynamics was evident alongside the lack of dimensional awareness in space. A reduction of clarity in energy and direction through movement was also observed. Due to isolation and no use of physical contact, partnering skills and sensing each other in space were stunted. Moreover, the loss of expression due to the mask covering the nose and mouth was tangible. In order to address some of these noticeable changes as well as to foster body connectivity, dimensional performance, somatic awareness, and spatial intent, virtual classes were adapted and integrated with a variety of training approaches: Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and Countertechnique®. Returning to practice in the physical space, the students needed requisites to reexamine and discover fundamental kinesthetic concepts.

LMA was founded by Rudolf von Laban (1879-1958) and is a theoretical framework and comprehensive language for describing movement. It consists of the basic conceptual components of Body, Effort, Shape and Space (BESS). The categories of BESS provide a multi-faceted and comprehensive ‘map’ for ballet technique (Whittier 97). LMA’s Dimensional and Diagonal Scales in Space were utilized in ballet technique class in order for students to redevelop, recover, and discover the embodied dimensional concepts and clarity of directions.



Laban devised many movement scales; the Dimensional and Diagonal Scales are the most significant for expanding 3-dimensional awareness in ballet technique. The Dimensional Scale is looked upon as the ‘stable’ scale. This means that it is relatively easy to maintain balance as the body moves between a vertical, horizontal, or sagittal axis. The Dimensional Scale moves in a one dimensional direction at a time and has a stabilizing effort on the body meaning, positions can be held. In the Diagonal Scale, no position can be held because it is so fleeting and every point reached finds the body at its most unstable (Newlove & Dalby 73). Practice of the Diagonal Scale helps students in ballet to sense Cross-Lateral Connectivity, Core-Distal Connectivity, Upper-Lower Connectivity, and Head-Tail Connectivity. It invites students to explore initiations of movement and successive sequencing that avoids the typical tendency in ballet as static sculptural movement. Furthermore, use of the Diagonal Scale brings recognition of dynamic shape to the moving body in space. According to Peggy Hackney, dance educator and movement analyst, “applying this process of shape change to movement is particularly important for dancers who seems to get stuck in trying to ‘make the right shape’, but are not concerning internally to enjoy the forming process itself.” The Diagonal Scale

allows students to investigate how the body expands, condenses, and forms three-dimensionally into space.

Throughout daily practice with the Dimensional/Diagonal Scales in LMA, students developed Spatial Intent, which involves the decisions dancers make about their use of space. They also discovered Kinesphere: the personal space surrounding the body.

Dancers explore their Kinesphere, investigate spatial pulls and pathways, and use counter-pull tensions in space to stabilize the body (Whittier 98) and to increase the mobility of the body. The use of Kinesphere enables the dancer to execute complex and specific movements within spatial concepts with precision and ease. Countertensions describe the oppositional spatial tensions that support human movement. These oppositional spatial tensions enhance balance, alignment, and placement in dance.

For the first time since its founding, Countertechnique® was temporarily shifted online for access to dance classes while dancers were in quarantine:

Countertechnique® was developed by Anouk van Dijk throughout her twenty-five years career as a dancer, choreographer and teacher, Countertechnique® provides tools for body and mind to deal with the demanding dance practice of the 21st century. It is a movement system to help the dancer think about the dancing body, focusing on the process of incorporating information into action. Within a clear structure of exercises, the Countertechnique® class thoroughly prepares the body for rehearsal and performance, enabling dancers to move bigger, more fluidly and more spatially, while becoming stronger and more flexible (“What It Is”).

The overall approach to teaching Countertechnique® is “gentle, yet demanding” (van Dijk, Anouk, “Practical Tools for a Demanding Profession” 63). This translated well into limited physical spaces of the home as dancers were experiencing isolation, disconnection from other people, and a loss of their familiar studio practice. The remote learning experience turned out to be an opportunity for many dancers to go inward and work on a deeper level with their own individual practice. With the application of Countertechnique®, it is possible to dance expansively in small spaces. This is possible because “Countertechnique is not a style but, rather, consists of organized and pragmatic information that provides a means to work with the body efficiently” (van Dijk, Anouk. “Practical Tools for a Demanding Profession” 72) also known as a “task based approach” to movement.

Over the first few months of teaching virtual classes, shorter and simpler exercises were given to assist the dancer in moving efficiently within a confined space. The inability to safely engage in jumping and traveling exercises gave way for the opportunity for the dancer to work more in depth with concepts such as shifting weight, efficiently directing and counter-directing energy, and considering new ways of integrating the mind and body through dance. When the movement combinations are less complex and entail more repetition within the exercise itself, the dancers find it easier to stay with the given task, experience a more embodied practice, and are less limited in their movement with the lack of space. Utilizing “practical anatomical knowledge that is crucial for understanding how the joints work” (van Dijk, Anouk. “Practical Tools for a Demanding Profession” 74), provides tools to a more practical approach to functional and efficient movement. Anatomical facts and pragmatic language provide the dancers with a shared and equitable vocabulary that is not specific to any style of technique; but rather allows the dancer to explore their own individual moving anatomy.

The pragmatic language of Countertechnique® and the use of the “toolbox, that contains the essential theoretical information needed to understand and apply Countertechnique” (van Dijk, Anouk. “Practical Tools for a Demanding Profession” 72) provides a foundation to easily adapt pedagogy to a variety of demographics and dancing spaces. During virtual classes, the more sensible the language was in describing the use of the body and pathways, the clearer the movement became for the dancers on the other side of the screen. Mirroring spatial pathways also clarified the dancer’s directions in their own spaces. The focus became the use of the body, general awareness, and efficient use of energy. Using “Common sense language that is least likely to be misunderstood” (van Dijk, Anouk. “Practical Tools for a Demanding Profession” 65), creates a more accessible and equitable learning environment for dancers of all technical levels and their diverse cultural backgrounds. While this language is not new to Countertechnique®, it became one of the most significant teaching tools while leading virtual classes throughout the COVID- 19 Pandemic.

In addition to the aforementioned tools, the breakdown of spatial trajectories and space analysis were substantial in broadening and clarifying the dancer’s movement. While this particular approach to describe and maximize space was already being used and continues to be used in the classroom; defining the trajectories and analysis of space assisted the dancer in expressing their body directions with ease. The application of William Forsythe’s adaptation of the 9-point cube for spatial analysis (“Dance Geometry Forsythe”) was a beneficial tool to detail the architecture of space for the dancer to individually explore and define. This assisted the dancer in acquiring 3-dimensional awareness in their movement. This proved challenging to communicate through a 2-dimensional portal. However, once translated fully through verbal cues

and images, these tools created a new connection of the dancer's relationship with their individual space.

Countertechnique is a combination of alignment–work practices based on pragmatic anatomical knowledge and a strong outgoing sense of moving into space. Interior space in the joints is made available by emphasizing exterior trajectories that help redistribute the body's weight in space. Emphasizing spatial trajectories, it becomes easier to have more freedom in the joints. Using a counter–direction helps maintain freedom and balance in movement; it enables the distribution of weight without falling down, holding on to a center, or gripping (van Dijk, Anouk. “Practical Tools for a Demanding Profession” 72).

The experience of teaching virtually and then transitioning back to in person classes has gleaned new pedagogical methods that have reshaped the structure of the live dance technique class. It was challenging yet invigorating to discover and rediscover teaching tools from Countertechnique® and LMA during the COVID-19 Pandemic in developing virtual classes for small spaces. This process has contributed significantly to the current in-person teaching practices at the university and abroad. Most importantly, it assisted dancers in the finding the process of movement through curiosity instead of expectation and kept the student and instructor alike, in the process of discovery. Bringing this experience back into the classroom in from 2021-2022 has provided an overall fresh perspective on what is possible in dance training and education moving forward.

## **Dance in the USA During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Socio-Political Context**

Socio-political issues in the USA during the COVID-19 Pandemic re-prioritized diversity, equity, and inclusion. These subjects have been significantly highlighted in recent curriculum changes of dance in higher education in the USA. In ballet, French terminology is historically considered the common language and this vocabulary has been broadly used across other genres in dance. However, some terminologies are not fundamentally relevant to the quality of the technique. Moreover, it creates cultural restriction which emphasizes Eurocentric perspectives. Ballet can be connected to the national and cultural heritage throughout the world. This can be a challenging idea for many who cogitate ballet a Eurocentric dance form (McCarthy-Brown 66).



There is a difference between teaching dance from a cultural perspective and teaching students from various ranges of cultural backgrounds. In the latter, dance is taught beyond a White cultural perspective as an international movement glossary. Using the pragmatic languages of LMA and/or Counter technique, creates a holistic atmosphere and educational environment with transcultural perspectives in a contemporary society and globalized world. Utilizing these languages in dance respects, appreciates and values individuality, the unique gifts in each dancing body, and the personal process over product. This approach paves a

new direction in contemporary dance today linguistically, culturally, academically, and professionally.

### **New Creative Approaches in the Choreographic Process for Live and Digital Performance**

New policies were put into place at WMU for the choreographic process during the COVID-19 Pandemic from 2020 to 2021. There was no partnering or physical contact allowed. The physical space for dancing and locomotion was restricted. The overlapping of spatial pathways was also limited. The compositional possibilities of narrative were stagnated so it became rather abstract and ambiguous. The continued use of masks covered the characteristic identity and theatrical expression of the dancer; therefore, masks became a choreographic and intentional choice for costuming and narrative structure.

Because of the Pandemic, many structural changes also took place within WMU. Many units were moved to other buildings on campus to consolidate resources. The College of Fine Arts acquired Motion Capture technology software and equipment that is currently set up in one of the Dance Department's small studios. Due to this structural change, motion capture technology became more accessible to the Department of Dance and expanded the ability to research digital mediums. Motion Capture is a technology that blends real life and animation. This process captures live moving bodies and transfers them into computerized form. This data can then be cleaned and rendered to make work in film or screendance format in addition to real time.

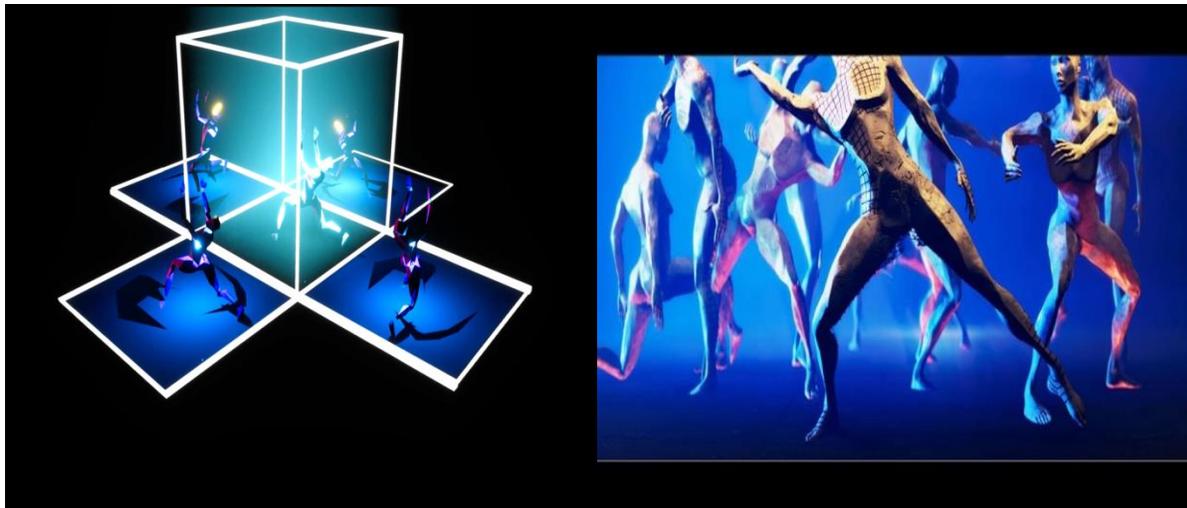
Despite these limitations, the in-person choreographic work, *The Moon reflected in East Sea 1945*, was successfully presented at WMU in February 2021; live and digitalized versions of this dance (choreographed by Seyong Kim, Assistant Professor at WMU) were internationally invited to perform at the dance conferences and the festivals in Detroit (MI), Chicago

(IL), Philadelphia (PA), Cleveland (OH), New York City (NY), Busan (South Korea), Tokyo (Japan), Mexico City (Mexico), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), and Florence (Italy). *The Moon reflected in East Sea 1945* is a contemporary dance in commemoration of So-nyeo-sang (Statue of Peace) in Korea. Erected as an apology and remembrance, it symbolizes the victims of sexual slavery, known as “Comfort Women” by the Japanese military until the end of Pacific war during World War II. [East Sea is a political, diplomatic region between Korea and Japan.] This piece does not intend to re-examine international conflict in East Asia, but to move forward with newly-gained insight of peaceful co-existence in globalization.



In the realm of digital performance, the integration of motion capture technology and choreography were used to create two screendances (choreographed by Kelsey Paschich, Assistant Professor at WMU): *Recode* (2021) and *Stranger* (2022). *Recode* explores dualistic identities as they exist during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This work utilizes dance to explore how

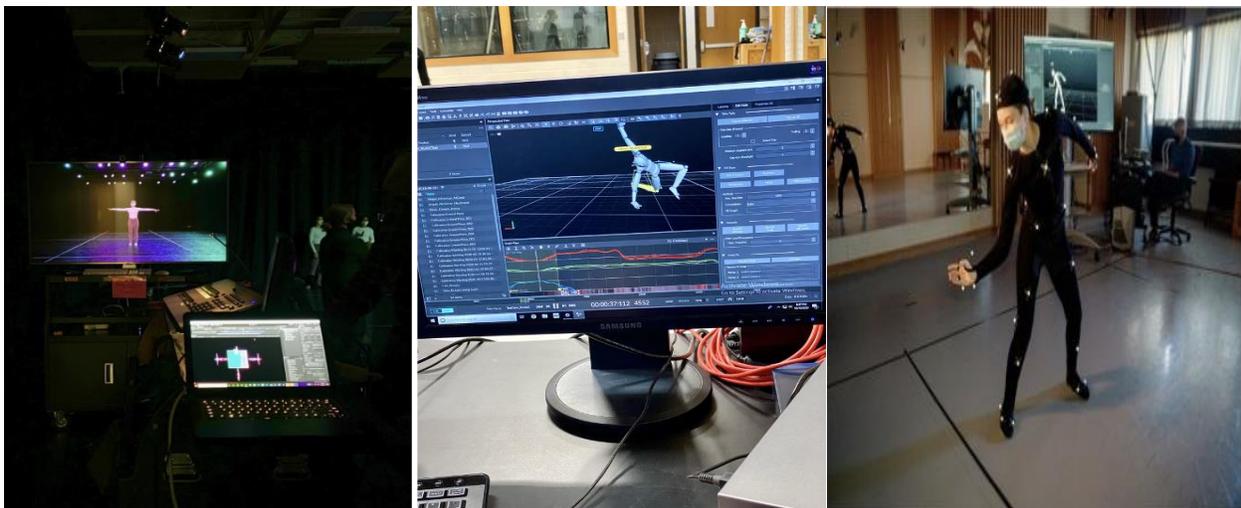
information can be lost, glitched, or broken down through the current modes of communication, therefore transforming how humans are interacting with each other and themselves. This digital work is an intersection of dance film and motion capture technology. *Stranger*, investigates the iterations of the self and the paradoxical experience of being a stranger to oneself. Because of the nature of motion capture, with the ability of capturing one to two dancers at a time, this process worked well within the limitations of space and social distancing during the pandemic.



To create these works, each dancer suited up in a full body suit made of flexible fabric and Velcro which included gloves, booties for the feet, and a head cap. Over fifty reflective markers attach to the body suit at particular points of the body to help the twenty-six cameras capture the motion/dancing. These individual capture sessions were an opportunity to coach the dancers in a unique dynamic quality and effort specific to the needs of motion capture. All composition of space and a good amount of manipulation of time, was done digitally in post-production. This process frontloaded the schedule with the choreographic process and capturing motion for the dancers. The 10 x 10 boxes taped on the studio floors informed the concept and the choreography. Once finished with this initial part of the process, the data was edited together

and integrated with the animated characters. A good part of the compositional process was done with technology, which meant there was less live interaction between the choreographer and dancers in the choreographic process. Despite the many negative impacts of the Pandemic, the restrictions were motivation to explore new ways of creating with technology and has the advantage of sharing the work globally across geographic boundaries. *Recode* has been selected and screened in eleven different festivals throughout the United States, Lisbon (Portugal), and Istanbul (Turkey). As new choreographic processes developed during the pandemic, motion capture proved to be a beneficial creative tool because of the individual nature of the capturing process and the agency to create a good portion of the work digitally in post-production with less face to face interaction amongst the cast after the choreography was set.

Motion capture technology and dance film have proven to be a sustainable way forward for dance making and innovation. In 2022, most of these restrictions have been lifted. What was gleaned from the creative challenges during this time opened up new choreographic possibilities for the live and digital performance on a continuum.



## **Reflections from Avree Gundersen (BFA Senior '22 in Dance at WMU)**

*Over the course of the pandemic a slow evolution of self-realization took place. When lockdown began, I was a sophomore in college and was wrapping up one of my busiest years as a dancer, so when everything got put to a hold it almost didn't know what to do with myself or let alone what to do for myself. My biggest worry was that as a dancer, I would not be able to keep up with my training and lose all the progress I made in the first two years of college. I quickly understood that I was holding other people responsible for my progress and training.*

*For years that has been the case where I waited for others to train me, but when that in-person training was not an option anymore I quickly understood that the only person responsible for my progress was me. Dance and movement started to act as a service of physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional health for me. I always considered dance to be a holistic approach of maintaining health and wellness, but it wasn't until the middle of the pandemic where began to really listen to my body and let the movement tend to my needs.*

*Most importantly, after coming out of months in quarantine and isolation, I reflected on the person and dancer I was before the pandemic and saw that I was always waiting. I was always waiting for my future-self to reach my goals and fulfill my promises. The pandemic made me realize that I can't put my hopes into the future, I need to invest in the here and now. Now I just ask myself everyday, "what am I waiting for?"*

## **New Insights + Possibilities Gleaned: Moving Forward**

Although the pandemic was taxing in many ways, being faced with unprecedented limitations in dance education necessitated adaptations and innovative approaches in pedagogy that produced creative solutions for new ways of working. Some of the positive results are as follows: taking class anywhere and anytime from teachers around the world, connecting the global community through dance, and broadening the audience base beyond geographical limitations for performances and events. There were also new developments in the dance industry through dance for film, screendance, and other digital technology like motion capture. Prior to the pandemic, these mediums were not new to dance making. However, the number of artists that utilized dance and technology to create during this time, when in person performance was not possible, is significant. The popularity in digital dance is now thriving and virtual performance is now more valued as a legitimate method of delivery.

The COVID-19 Pandemic opened a door to reimagine the socio-political significance that forced many to reconsider existing structures and procedures, resulting in new creative ideas in dance globally. Throughout these challenging times, technology was prioritized, and the use of technology is now paramount to develop new learning systems in dance education and to provide future possibilities in the artform of dance. There were many new insights gleaned during this trying time that will carry forward and shift the landscape of dance education for many years to come.

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## Biography



**Seyong Kim** is an Assistant Professor of Dance at Western Michigan University (Kalamazoo, MI). He holds an MA in Dance Education from New York University and an MA in Dance from Sung-Kyun-Kwan University in South Korea. He is a CMA (Certified Movement Analyst), a RSDE (Registered Somatic Dance Educator), a PBT (Progressing Ballet Technique) Certified Teacher, and an ABT® (American Ballet Theatre) Certified Teacher. Additionally, he earned Diversity and Inclusion Certificate from Cornell University. Seyong has taught for Rutgers University, Kent State University, The University of Georgia, Randolph College, Peridance, Libera University in Italy, World Dance Alliance (WDAA), Americas, American College Dance Association (ACDA), Alabama Dance Festival, and Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company. As a professional dancer, Seyong has danced with Metropolitan Opera Ballet at Lincoln Center, Albania Opera Ballet Theatre, Baltimore Ballet, Traverse City Dance Project, TAKE Dance, and Oakland Ballet Company. In addition, his choreographic works have been internationally invited at Landestheater Coburg Germany, Florence Dance on Screen Festival in Italy, International Contemporary Dance Festival Mexico City, Taiwan JueDai Taipei International Dance Festival, ProArteDanza in Canada, Seoul International Dance Festival in TANK, Battery Dance Festival, Lindenwood University, Cleveland Dance Festival, Midwest Regional Alternative Dance Festival, Chicago International Dance Forum, Detroit Dance City Festival, Boston Contemporary

Dance Festival, Orlando Contemporary Dance Choreography Festival, Oklahoma International Dance Festival, and Nimbus OFFLINE+ at the BAM Fisher.



**Kelsey Paschich** is a dancer, choreographer, educator, and interdisciplinary artist. She is an Assistant Professor of Dance at Western Michigan University. Paschich holds an MFA in Dance from the University of New Mexico and a BFA in Dance from Point Park University. She is 1 of 36 Countertechnique® Certified Teachers globally. Her international performance career spans 20 years and multiple genres. She is the Founder and Artistic Director of project whitewall where she experiments with and creates live + digital work that explores humanness, the moving body, and its relationship to technology. Her current digital choreographic work has been screened in Germany, Portugal, Turkey, and throughout the United States. Paschich is the recipient of Distant Digital Dance Maker commission for *Tanz mit dem Tiger* 2021 (Ulm, Germany), Creative Living for Dancers Award 2021 (Brussels, Belgium), the Dancing Lab Residency at the National Center for Choreography at the University of Akron (NCCAkron) 2021, as well as the National Dizzy Feet Foundation Gene Kelly Legacy Scholarship in 2016. Paschich's choreographic and performative career informs her pedagogical methodology in providing a progressive and holistic education to cultivate the next generation of artists.