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Author

Holbrook, Maya

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A Dancer Who Misses Pandemic Lockdown?

Believe it or not, there was a lot to learn at Zoom University

by Maya Holbrook

During the early months of the Coronavirus pandemic, the dance community showed extreme resilience, quickly navigating Zoom, while discovering other unique ways to continue dancing through global lockdowns. Transferring to the online realm, I was disappointed that my college experience changed so radically, but I was nonetheless willing to do whatever I needed to do until we were able to go back in-person. Zoom University, as some call it, was thought to last a few months. Nobody knew that would take two years.

Returning to campus as a Senior in the fall of 2021, I was eager and ready for my last year of undergrad. I was looking forward to seeing my friends, performing, and finally receiving my tuition money's worth with in-person instruction. However, I quickly remembered the harsh reality of a dance major—long days on campus, basically living out of your backpack, lunch box, and tote bag.

Stepping into the studio for the first time, I was no longer grand battement-ing into my sofa. I didn't need to restrict my movement to confine myself in a small living room, I could finally move past my kinesphere. Able to dance with no bounds, I quickly found my body in more physical pain than I remember from technique classes on Zoom. My modern dance professor would ask our class to share a word to describe how we were feeling at that time, and for the first 3 weeks mine were "tight," "sore," "stiff," and "out of shape." To my surprise, returning to in-person instruction made me reminisce fondly about Zoom University.

Take my attitude toward injury, which changed during the pandemic. Prior to my time at UC Irvine, I had experienced very minor injuries. But in my third year, I sprained my MCL in my left knee and began my journey to recovery. I was relentless and at times in denial. I attended all of my technique classes, crutches in use, journal in hand, so I could observe and take notes. Initially, doctors thought it would be a two-week recovery; it was roughly ten. After having to drop all of my dance classes and my role in a concert (2 days before opening night, may I add), I was told by one dance professor, "Maybe you should do something else with dance." I was baffled. After recovery, I never had the time to slow down, assess how my knee felt, and cross-train to prevent future incidents. Fast-forward to the first lockdowns of the pandemic, I finally had the time to properly listen to my body and take a break, rather than pushing through the pain for the sake of a good grade in ballet class. Away from the studio, I was able to reflect on my habits to push through pain, something ingrained in my mind from strict classical ballet training since an early age.

Throughout the pandemic, professors became increasingly aware of injuries, from bad flooring, lack of proper equipment, etc. While my injury occurred before then, I took advantage of professors' adapting expectations. I was able to change my persevering habits and allow my body to rest when I needed it the most. Back in person, there is an expectation to participate and an overwhelming sense of guilt. This is my last year! I should be soaking up these last classes while I can! But the reality is, my body is tired. It is screaming for a break that I feel guilty of taking now that we have returned to in-person instruction.

During the early days of the pandemic, discussions about mental health came to the forefront. According to Javed Latoo, "most countries spend less than 2% of their health budget on mental

health” resulting in an everlasting stigma around these services (Lato et al). To me it seemed dancers were expected to push through mental struggles just like physical injuries. They were seen as ideal perfect human specimens, able to defy odds to entertain audiences, no matter what. Studies on the general public’s mental health during the pandemic have shown anxiety and depression are among the most common illnesses, also the “most psychiatric morbidity associated with COVID-19” (Lato et al). Nowadays I see a shift in the dance world, with mental health getting more attention in a professional environment because dancers are no longer required to compartmentalize the two.

Then, there’s the dress code for technique classes. Before the pandemic, it was more strict, especially for ballet. In skin-hugging tights and leotard, I would constantly obsess about my insecurities, picking apart each thing I hated about my reflection. I would do the same thing to my dancing, obsessing over a lack of turnout or other imperfect lines. Forced to dance in my living room, mirrors were absent. Some of my classmates would mention pinning themselves on Zoom in place of a mirror, but I opted to feel the movement inside of my body rather than forcing it as I did for many years prior. No longer relying on a mirror to correct a sickled foot, I had to relearn dance in my body and focus on the *feel* rather than the *look*. In the comfort of my own home, I didn’t have to follow dress codes that made me insecure and self-conscious, opting for basketball shorts and a t-shirt (probably launching my departure from ballet and into modern style dance).

In a 2004 study on the impact of mirrors on body image in dancers, two groups of dancers were examined, one with mirrors and one without. Using the BASS (Body Area Satisfaction Scale), researchers were able to show the impact that mirrors had on a dancer’s perception of their own body. They found that BASS among dancers without a mirror increased by 16%, while the group with mirrors decreased by 4.2% (Radall). While my strict classical ballet training says I need a mirror for alignment reasons, this study exemplifies the dangers and harm from mirrors. My peers have also confided that they have experienced body dysmorphia due to tight clothing and looking in the mirror all day every day. Although I can’t escape mirrors now, dancing in my living room has made me realize they do more harm than good. As audition season approaches I find myself stuck in the idea of perfecting my craft. Back in the studio, mirrors seem necessary to track my progress. In ballet especially, I would fear my technique would dwindle by not utilizing an important tool at my disposal. However, another part of me misses dancing without a care of what I look like.

I also miss Zoom for the lack of competition in class. Some days in the studio I would be competitive for feedback, a single comment reassuring and validating my hard work and resilience. Back in person, the energy in the room has shifted, especially in classes with professors everyone wants to impress, crowding the front of the room, cutthroat for the sake of being noticed. While Zoom lacked the energy of an in-person class, I miss the gentler atmosphere.

I also mourn the convenience of Zoom fairly often. Attending class was easy, requiring only a few clicks to log on. Nowadays, I am running across campus to attend my anthropology class at 11:00 a.m. and speed-walking to ballet at 12:30 p.m. In my last year of undergrad, I continue to have a full academic schedule due to a double minor I picked up during my 2nd year. Back-to-back schedules were manageable over Zoom. In person, they are exhausting, usually on campus for 12-hour days with an hour break at most. On the other hand, I will say that Zoom’s convenience caused me to lose a lot of motivation, as it was difficult to get out of bed every day.

Another pandemic advantage was making dance classes more accessible. I was able to train using pre-recorded or live (through Zoom) masterclasses from companies worldwide. Despite distance, artists from opposite sides of the country are also able to collaborate and create works that would have been impossible without technological advancements in the dance realm (Levey et al). Social media has also contributed to the accessibility of dance in the online environment as seen on Facebook and TikTok (Ellis). Dance is a traditionally privileged person's sport, and with the pandemic it is accessible to everyone despite physical, monetary or other limitations.

I remember when I first came to university I would get really homesick. Currently, I feel as though I'm pulled in a million directions, sometimes failing to prioritize my family. Back in person, I miss the quality time that I was able to experience at home during lockdown. Don't let me fool you, it was not always rainbows and daisies, but I find myself longing for the uninterrupted quality time I experienced during that time. My schedule is too hectic to see family now, and when I do visit home it is to film at my home studio for company auditions rather than a fun and relaxing weekend with my sisters. Living on my own again, I miss the free food, rent, and other paid-off expenses. I miss the comfort food and late-night treats with my mom. At school I am in constant financial stress and fearful of going over my weekly budget, eating 60-second microwavable lentils for the third night in a row.

Continuing to navigate in-person instruction, I find myself longing for the Zoom days. Professors were more understanding of circumstances, my body was given the time to heal, and I reconnected with family. From online instruction starting in April 2020, to in-person in Fall 2021, back to online for half of Winter 2022, I am thoroughly impressed by the resilience of the dance community and of myself. There were many times that I could have quit, but I chose to stick with it. While I'm glad I went through Zoom University, I am apprehensive about staying in person. COVID-19 may begin to seem like a worry of the past, but it will stay with us for a long time, much like the lessons I learned from online learning.



Maya Holbrook graduated from The University of California, Irvine in June 2022 with a BFA in Dance Performance and minors in Anthropology and Political Science. She will be auditioning and hopes to perform with a professional modern dance company.

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