

## Teaching about sexual and social consent through peer-coaching dance

***A practice insight working paper by James Underwood, Truc Thanh Truong, Dorcas Iyanuoluwa Fakile, Beatrice Balfour Sogol Zaman, Nguyen Huong Tra and (Elly) Li Tai***

This working paper comes from a series of related projects involving teachers and lecturers from Vietnam, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. These have included projects on: empowering young women leaders, developing critical thinking and in this case on embedding sexual and social consent within the wider curriculum. All these interlinked projects have at their core the practice of young people working together using coaching strategies, especially peer-coaching.

### **Teaching about sexual and social consent: the current context.**

Teaching about the importance of consent is an important part of sex and social education curriculums in many countries including in the United Kingdom. These lessons often beginning in primary school. There are acknowledged models of excellence coming from the United Kingdom for all school ages. These include resources from the *'schools consent curriculum'*, and the *'national*

*association of head teachers'*. However, it is also an area that teachers at secondary school find challenging. We are not suggesting in this short paper that sex and consent education are moved out of their usual context of the biology and PSHE classroom. However, we are suggesting that a cross-curricula approach including the peer coaching of dance can strengthen teaching and learning in this area.

Consent education is often, although by no means always, embedded within the sex education aspects of biology lessons, which can be an uncomfortable place for teaching about this topic to sit. Consent is a bigger concept that stretches beyond sexual consent. An alternative approach, in schools with a broader understanding of the relevance of consent, is that consent education is taught within - personal social and health education (PSHE) lessons rather than within science lessons. However, PSHE lessons are already a crowded and contested space in curriculums in the United Kingdom and in other countries, with competing demands for the teaching of a



wide range of life skills. Teachers teaching consent in both these subject contexts report that consent can be hard to teach didactically yet they feel that it should not be taught in a way that implies that such an important concept is up for discussion.

As regards the teaching of sex education. This strand of education at its best aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives. However, world-wide too many young people receive confusing and conflicting information about relationships and sex, as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood. The absence of such sexual literacy can be the source of many health and social hazards, including sexually transmitted diseases, stress and anxiety. At its best sex education can also interlink with age-appropriate education on human rights, gender equality and relationships; emphasizing values such as respect, inclusion, non-discrimination, equality, empathy, responsibility and reciprocity. This is especially the case when sex education involves the teaching of consent.

Positively, schools and teachers that we have worked with have stressed the importance of teaching about consent. However, even so, this important area remains a particularly challenging one for teachers and schools to address. Secondary school teachers, in particular, have told us that while the concept of consent itself is very simple and its importance evident, somehow conventional desk-based discussion lessons get bogged down. Even when teacher-led discussion lessons go well the stories that come out can complicate by their personal nature. We have been told of lessons in which - a story about a beautiful natural kiss, that was mutually spontaneous, became mis-interpreted as challenging the importance of asking for consent; and of other occasions when the story of an aunt who asks to be hugged and one feels one should out of kindness and does even if it is against one's own feelings - was similarly mis-construed. These stories although enriching of life's complexities, in the narrow confines of the one-hour lesson fail to fully address 'consent' and instead confuse this important and simple principle.

This therefore found us (the authors' of this piece) collectively thinking if alongside desk-based lessons, consent could be taught in other ways and also had us discussing how we had done this. One way that emerged through these discussions was teaching consent via



enabling the peer-coaching of dance. For some of the authors this was practice that they had previously developed, for others it resonated with concepts and ideas that we were developing in other contexts.

### **Teaching through peer-coaching.**

Teaching through peer-coaching, whether it be dance or other skills or subjects, is an area of practice that had engaged all the writers, prior to working together to write this article. We had all at some point used this approach to teach. Therefore, the step to using peer-coaching to teach about sexual consent seemed fitting to all of us, even those who had not taught this topic in this way before. Essentially peer-coaching is a method of teaching that requires the teacher to take a step back and guide students to derive their own answers through attempting to learn a skill or subject together. It is therefore clearly distinct from traditional lecture style teaching. However, it is also distinct from conventional teacher led discussions because all sides of the learning conversation are being led by the students. And it is also distinct from pair-share or other similar strategies because of the length of time over which peer-coaching is the main form of learning.

Peer-coaching will often involve the learning of a specific skill, such as dance. However,

because it involves an ongoing process of negotiation and agreement it also equally often facilitates the learning of more broadly applicable life skills. In this way peer-coaching functions to facilitate learning via the illustrative power of lived examples. This can be clearly seen through using 'dance' to teach about sexual consent. In this case dance becomes a well-suited lived analogy to help young people visualise the concepts of sexual and social consent. Sex education needs activities and discussions with which to teach concepts such as 'respect' and 'consent' in real world contexts, not just the biological aspects of sex. However, as even open discussions about sex are problematic in many cultures, teachers need a tactful and a culturally appropriate way with which to explore these concepts, and this may be achieved through 'dance'. The peer-coaching of consent via dance is a powerful teaching approach in all cultures but especially in cultures where perceptions of vulgar or inappropriate language limit open discussion about sex. In these contexts, the three concepts of sex, consent, and dance can be interlinked via the thread of peer-coaching.

Other important aspects of peer-coaching are that it is distinct from being coached by an expert as it involves less power distance and more equal role division. If skilfully planned, by the teacher, it can also involve variety in



the pace and structure of lessons. An important component of peer-coaching can be facilitated group work. Group work when used as a way of peer-learning can enable rich discussions and the gathering of diverse thoughts and experiences. This can then be followed by deep individual reflective sessions and by peer-coaching in pairs. In this way a series of lessons involving peer-coaching can be varied, interesting and engaging, whilst students can also tailor the concepts learnt in that lesson to their own needs. It is an approach that involves considerable planning even if at the point of delivering the lessons the teacher appears to have let go of their central position in the classroom. We have also used this peer-coaching approach with other courses such as one on empowering young women leaders, and participants received it well, even beyond our expectations. In this instance, once we had modelled the coaching approach, participants had the chance to practice it in groups with heightened bonding and confidence.

### **Peer-coaching dance**

The fundamental principle of dance is that it is as an art form or an activity that utilizes the body and the range of movement within the body's capability. It is a way of perceiving a body of knowledge, and a personal and social experience. It is a pathway to creativity, self-consciousness and awareness about other

cultures and the development of expressive capacity. Dance can transmit values and attitudes which make it possible to share emotions and ideas with other individuals. It is therefore a powerful tool for social-educative action and intervention as it opens up a space for students to be actively involved with the learning process, encouraging them to take ownership of their education through the use of the expressive languages taught within dance education. Through dance, students can become actively engaged in learning to use movement to communicate and express their ideas, feelings, and thoughts, which correlates with elements that are central to the teaching of consent.

From our own teaching, our work together, and our work with practitioners, two concepts from the teaching and learning of dance have emerged as especially useful for enabling the peer-coaching of consent. These terms are firstly 'agreement' and secondly 'response'.

'Agreement' is seen in the process of either learning or designing a dance. Agreement is heard in any dance studio in conversations such as: 'I need to hold your hand to make this turn', 'I need to hold your waist to guide you on this spin', 'you need to push me by the bum to drive me into that lift'. Then 'is that Ok', and the reply 'yes' or 'no, but can we do



this instead'. Watching students learn or choreograph a dance is watching young people have sophisticated, sensitive, open, honest conversations about consent, without perhaps even realising that they are. These conversations are not didactic or even discursive in a traditional sense but instead involve a peer-coaching approach amongst the students. The role of the teacher becomes that of monitoring and ensuring the boundaries of these conversations: whilst the students teach each other through the process of asking, suggesting, answering and developing in order to find their own solutions.

The second concept is 'response'. This is seen in improvised, social dances. Many of these dances involve a couple: one of whom leads while the other follows. However, the concept of leading is mis-understood by non-dancers. The lead is not shoving the follower around the floor, rather by subtle moves of their body the lead provides space for the follower to move into or equally possibly to not. They might also hint at the move they want. A dance is a conversation in body language, a lead suggests but does not force. Any good lead has, on some occasions, offered a space for their partner to turn into them and their partner decided not, and the dance proceeds smoothly and respectfully even so.

To return to the learning of consent. The lead up to the 'spontaneous beautiful kiss conversation', that many of us have heard brought into a lesson was, even if the kissers did not know it, in fact a dance. A dance of eyes, expressions, body language and initial touches. And at any stage it could have taken another direction and proceeded respectfully and kindly. Through combining the ideas of 'agreement' and 'response' - the idea that consent is agreed in language but also continuously negotiated, with a right to withdraw at any stage, can be established. A dancer in an improvised, social dance has a right to agree the boundaries of a dance prior to dancing but also has a right to change the direction of the dance or stop dancing at any point and a right to have that respected.

### **Concluding thoughts**

We are not suggesting in this short paper that sex and consent education are moved out of the biology and PSHE classroom, rather we are suggesting that a cross-curricula approach including the peer-coaching of dance can strengthen teaching and learning in this area. This is because of the potential for peer coaching to empower the young people involved in a way that teacher led learning never fully can. Empowerment is core to developing a mindset by which a young person has the capacity to understand and enact consent. An older teacher didactically



explaining the concept of consent is a great improvement on 50 years ago when consent was not even on the curriculum in the United Kingdom, but it is limited; whilst a classroom discussion on consent, while it still has its place, risks derailment. However, a student within the safe space of a classroom, asserting their boundaries and negotiating different

wants, with their peers, within the physical but non-sexual context of dance - becomes someone who is more practised and skilled at such assertion within the complex young adult world that they are entering.

