

Transform Dance (Generator Pilot Project)

Podcast Transcript Episode 3: Facilitator Roundtable



Meg Saxby [00:00:03] Hi everyone, and welcome back to the TransformDance podcast. You're listening to episode three. In episode one, we look at the macro context of dance and what it's like as a workplace. In episode two, we hear individually from one of our participants who designed a process in order to transform the harassment that she experienced in a previous workplace. In episode three, which is today's episode, you're going to hear three T.J. facilitators in conversation with each other. They're going to be talking about the cases they supported and about their thoughts on using T.J. within organizations broadly, but in particular within arts organizations and non-profits. We have Hirut Melaku. She will share her thoughts and feedback from a participant who she supported. B.K. Chan and Douglas Stewart, both of whom have lots of experience doing emotional literacy, anti-racism, and equity work. And they'll be talking about what it was like to build a workshop series for male-identified leaders that tried to help people build skills for psychological safety in the workplace, and how do we change the conditions of the dance industry that way. It was really interesting to hear their ideas about what's hard about this work, what could happen next within this work, and where they see this work could go. It's a fascinating conversation and I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

Meg Saxby [00:01:28] Hi, everyone, and welcome back to the TransformDance podcast. My name is Meg Saxby and I am hosting today. I'm going to be interviewing a group of speakers who are transformative justice facilitators, educators and activists and advocates. So I am here today with B.K. Chan, Douglas Stewart, and Hirut Melaku. And again, TransformDance is a project that was active in Toronto between the spring of 2019 and spring and summer of 2020. We were funded by the Toronto Arts Council to use transformative justice approaches to work towards healing and community transformation in the Toronto dance community, specifically related to experiences of gender-based and sexual harassment in dance workplaces. So I'm going to ask our speakers to introduce themselves and then we'll get into it.

B.K. Chan [00:02:20] My name is Karen B.K. Chan. I'm one of the facilitators on this project. I'm working with one of the participants on one of our case studies. And as well, on the third case, which you'll hear more about. So I'm an emotional literacy educator and I'm interested in how emotions can be a bridge to problem-solving as opposed to a barrier, which is



sometimes how they're seen as being. So that's why I'm here. And I come from a background of emotional intelligence and sex education. And so a lot of my experience has been with doing antiviolence work connected to sexual violence and also talking to people about connecting mind, body, emotions and so forth.

Douglas Stewart [00:03:09] My name is Douglas Stewart and I would describe myself as an equity anti-racism, anti-oppression and organized development consultant. I am involved in this project on the advisory committee, as well as working as one of the facilitators on case study three, along with B.K., and my background is in the community, mostly working with not-for-profit, community-based, and health care serving agencies. I am somebody who has been doing equity and anti-oppression oriented work in communities over the years. I mean, my grounding is actually in queer communities and HIV-AIDS. It's sort of the early part of my professional career. And then, you know, there's always been this mix of professional and activism, right? So the work I've been drawn to has been work. That's also hopefully gonna impact social change in some kind of way or support that. And so I was drawn to this work partly because I've been doing some work already within the arts community around how we think about justice in terms of, you know, marginalized and vulnerable peoples' experience. And so, yeah, it's been an interesting way to sit in conversations or reflections within the advisory group, as well as now building curriculum around our particular case study that we're working on. And really, with multiple stakeholders who are in key roles to make a difference.

Hirut Melaku [00:04:31] My name is Hirut Melaku. And I came into this world of TransformDance and transformative justice through my work at the Third Eye Collective, which is a survivor-based organization for black women who have experienced violence. And so when I heard that TransformDance, was actually interested in doing something, I saw that this is an excellent opportunity to see what had been working at the grassroots level, with kind of like, no funding, with a lot of, like volunteer work, just really lay the ground for transformative justice to take place. And now with this, with the support, the institutional support and the funding support, I was really interested to see what we can accomplish with these cases.

Meg Saxby [00:05:18] Thank you. Great. I wanted to ask; we talked about this a little bit on the first episode when I was talking to Kristina, who's the Executive Director of Generator about where this project came from. But I wanted to ask you folks, from what you have seen, what would you say are some of the problems of how workplaces, especially arts workplaces, if you have background in that, but workplaces in general, deal with harassment?

B.K. Chan [00:05:47] Yeah, great question. I think this is at the heart of why I think T.J. and R.J. are really necessary, because our structures for problem-solving and for addressing harm so often focus on the moment the harm is done and who did it and who experienced the harm versus seeing the greater structure of things that allow harm or, you know, that encourage even harm to be done and when harm is done to somebody specific, actually, it's done to a lot of people in the community in and around that person. So just taking an



approach that says actually we're all interconnected. That itself is really powerful for me, that the T.J. lens changes. And I think it also addresses the harm that happens when we do harm. So as opposed to I'm just punished for it, I'm actually also allowed to heal if I've done harm, either inadvertently or habitually or any of the ways I might do harm.

Meg Saxby [00:06:49] Thank you. Douglas. Anything you have to add to that?

Douglas Stewart [00:06:52] Well, the only thing I'd add is that it also removes the whole notion of the punitive. The idea that the goal of resolution is that, you know, somebody is, you know, the evil doer and somebody is the victim, right? Because I think our lives are much more complicated and layered than that. And I think what it allows is also to take the weight off the folk, people who are targets and who are the more socially-marginalized, to - I'm sorry, the word I've been playing with now is structural - like, being structurally-marginalized, right. That suddenly, there's an opportunity to negotiate resolution that allows for also, you know, looking at what it means, you know, to build on B.K.'s point the piece around, how do we restore community right after something has happened? Because when something happens, usually not a lot of us can just walk away in terms of just being able to pay our bills or even just the fact that there's particular reasons why we've joined organizations or joined communities to also live our lives, experience our lives and experience ourselves or even practice our art or, you know, our skills and so on. And to suddenly lose that because we've been targeted and we've been made vulnerable is a really big piece. And which is why people that hesitate to even want to name things or bring things forward. So I think what you know, T.J., or R.J., or however we frame it allows is for to take away the energy of, the pressure of, oh, my goodness, I'm not going to flag something that's going to position me in contentional way. And so, you know, here's an option to actually have a dialogue or conversation or a process that allows us to enter it differently and potentially exit it differently, right?

Meg Saxby [00:08:34] Thank you, Douglas. Hirut, do you have any anything to add on this part of what commonly doesn't work for survivors and others, when we think of how workplaces typically respond to harassment?

Hirut Melaku [00:08:46] I think it's been mentioned, but the only thing I would bring up as it needs to be survivor centered and the workplaces do not allow for that as being the first priority. There is just so many other legal consideration before the consideration of the survivor. And so it already that puts it at odds. Like Douglas said, you know, like it's not about... doesn't need to be about punitive. You know, there's a way of resolving conflicts and problem without making people discardable.

B.K. Chan [00:09:19] Yeah. I just wanted to add also that sometimes harm can be experienced without it being done. And so how like systemic injustices often work is that, you know, folks who experience it chronically on a daily basis are hyper vigilant about it. And so something can happen. And I've been in that experience myself where I'm experiencing scrutiny or I'm experiencing what I think of as exclusion or rejection. And it may not actually be happening, but a lot of times the classical sort of standard ways of



addressing did somebody do wrong doesn't allow for that harm to be taken care of, that injury to be taken care of. So I'm really interested also in addressing and caring for and repairing the hurt that can happen without intention and sometimes without it, quote unquote, even happening. They're worthwhile to look at and paying attention to.

Meg Saxby [00:10:21] Thank you. One of my favorite things about T.J. is how it turns out ideas about time on its head, because we have this idea that harm happens in an instant, but it's actually a lot more complex than that. I think that's an interesting thing that that comes out as we get deeper into T.J. processes. So Hirut worked as a facilitator on the first case study that we undertook, and she's brought some feedback, I think, both from her own experience and also from the experience the participant that she was walking with. So Hirut, I want to give you the mic now to share as much of that as you'd like to with our audience.

Hirut Melaku [00:11:00] Yeah, I had a wonderful conversation with my participant who has generously offered to give us feedback about what her experience has been. And so she is a black woman. She thought that was important to mention. And the way that she described it, it's like from the beginning of why she decided to enroll in this project is because she had seen my face and that of Douglas's face on the website. And so for her, it was important that she has a commonality with the project because based on the description of the call for participants, there was no specific mention around asking or inviting specifically racialized populations or other particular groups in particular. And as she understood it, that usually by default means that, you know, the dance world, it's for white people. And so she didn't want to participate in a project where she had to explain what it is to be black in addition to everything that was going on, or even just idea of what kind of racial violence that is a part of it. So that was the starting point for her. And even though she didn't know me, she respected Douglas's work. And so it really speaks to how it's a relationship-based project. And when we're asking people to come and feel safe and vulnerable, they have to have people whom they know could hold that space for them. So with me, we spent a lot of time just getting to know each other, building that trust. And so because of that, she felt comfortable incorporating elements that are rituals and ceremonies in there too, and setting up the environment for that, like, spiritual space. And I know that wasn't also spoken of in terms of when we're talking about T.J. in the call, but it's a very important part for people to feel that that's their space, that there is some allocation to make that happen. And she actually thought it was a really, really positive experience.

Meg Saxby [00:13:19] It's interesting because participant two also talked a little bit about some of the stuff that your participant had mentioned. One thing they mentioned was kind of like a healing that is spiritual as opposed to only mental or emotional. So I thought that was kind of an interesting overlap.

Hirut Melaku [00:13:35] It's kind of like I mean, each T.J. case is case by case. And it's different and the way she decided to do it is while she... there was her own personal experience, but she didn't see her experience as being separate from other black women's... other black dancers' experience, and that it's a communal experience as well, cause we're



addressing systemic issues of harm. So she decided to make an offering for black woman as part of the conversation. So we had a workshop and they were invited to come and talk and speak about their experience as well. And she curated the whole thing, and it was beyond beautiful. Unfortunately it was too short. I mean, I start working with her in September, you know, so when you think of the process, and then by the time the person starts telling their stories and then, like, identifying what their needs are and then like, the planning and the logistics... it's you know, in the past, it's been what, it's taken about two years to be doing such a process, so to try to do it under nine months. I mean, it's like quite ambitious.

Meg Saxby [00:14:49] It's interesting because another parallel... and I was thinking of... so just for logistics, for folks to understand, we had a certain amount of money earmarked for facilitators and for their hours, and that, divided by their rate turned into a certain amount of hours that were available. And then it was the other participant and facilitator together would figure out the kind of process that made sense. And what we learned in the case that Hirut was following was that because the participant felt that need to include collective healing as part of their experience, some of the hours went to that. And so having this one set number basically didn't work because for a person who hadn't needed that additional piece or that different piece, those hours would've been distributed differently. So it was a good learning for us in terms of like, particularly when we're thinking about harm that has a much more explicit collective dimension, right, when harm has a particular racialized aspect or if it has to do with a certain community, with disability or what have you, there needs to be something collective. And we need to plan for that. And that will take longer. And we need to be able to pay facilitators to support that, too.

Hirut Melaku [00:15:58] Yeah. In her case, she had a conversational workshop. It was over a weekend. So one day was allocated for this small, intimate conversation. And another one was a dance workshop the next day for other black women. And so when you looked at that amount of hours and resources allocated, it wasn't enough.

Meg Saxby [00:16:19] Yeah. And I think that's a way of thinking that probably comes from, in a lot of conventional harassment responses. It's like, it's a one to one or it's a very small and privatized process. Right? But what we're trying to do is a wider community approach. And so there needs to be more flex there. Did you have any other feedback that your participant wanted to share? Anything that's coming to mind as we're talking about this?

Hirut Melaku [00:16:43] Well, she felt empowered by giving back to the community.

Meg Saxby [00:16:49] Just one thing I think is worth mentioning is both Hirut and B.K.'s cases, you know, as they go on and go deeper, if we had continuing resources, my sense is that in both of those cases, because, for example, the group of people that Hirut's participant convened to talk about harassment of black women dancers, that could have very much gone in many different other directions. Right. There'd be other people and other experiences within that group that could have continued to work within this project. So what I noticed was a little bit like, you know, how mushrooms grow underground type of thing, like once we had the trust of one or two people. Because typically harm happens in



systems and in networks. Right. It isn't usually a one off situation. So that would be a way that this kind of approach could grow through those communities that are at risk of structural harm or who experience structural harm through the the trust within those networks.

Hirut Melaku [00:17:50] Yeah. I want to... well, for us to just recognize that there are people in those communities and those groups who are doing this work.

Meg Saxby [00:17:58] Yeah.

Hirut Melaku [00:17:58] They just have not been recognized by outsiders and are not receiving the funding, but the work is ongoing. So I think it's really important for listeners or the funders to think of like, well, how do we support the people who are already doing this work, and often those are like, racialized woman.

Meg Saxby [00:18:20] Absolutely. Later on, I want to ask folks about their thoughts about where this could go in the future, because one of the thoughts that we've been talking about is, you know, as a framework that's typically not funded. Right? And it's typically not played out in contexts where the people doing the the work are getting paid, like how do we ensure that if this framework becomes something that gets used in dance or arts or other sectors, that that income is flowing to those with the praxis and the most experience? So I want to flip to case three now, but cases one in two ended up being focused on specific individuals and experiences of harm and exclusion that they had had in their dance careers and in the dance communities. And by the time we started to get to case number three, one of the common trends I was hearing a lot about is folks would come forward to me and they would talk about harm they'd experienced, but they didn't always... they often didn't really want to address it in a super specific way. However, they often wanted to see something done proactively and preventively within the dance community to try to address some of these issues more structurally and more collectively. So we were hearing a lot about that. And we started tossing around at the adviser group the idea of using the funding for case number three to try to do something more collective. And we decided we were hearing about different kinds of harm that were happening in different dance spaces that really seemed to stem from leaders, either formal leaders or informal leaders, really not understanding or being aware of or being able to hold psychological safety. And that looked in many different ways. We heard about it in the form of bullying. We heard about it in form of harassment. We heard about it of dancers feeling really unsafe and that unsafety would play out different ways depending on their intersectionalities and their social identities. So we started thinking, wouldn't it be cool if we could develop some really interactive, really experiential professional development work, start building the kind of leaders that we want in dance with the recognition that a lot of people, they end up in a leadership role in a dancer and arts organization without any formal training, often with very little money, usually no mentorship or some mentorship, but not super formal. And sometimes whether they want to or not, they're just replicating what they've seen and experienced. Right? And so a lot of what T.J. is about is can we intervene in those conditions that create harm or that enable harm? So case study three ended up being instead of focusing on a previous instance of



harm, we ended up developing something that would be a four part workshop series that would be available to, we originally thought, eight to ten participants and we targeted male-identified leaders. And this wasn't because we didn't hear about harm that was done by people who were feminine of center or female identifying. It was because the harm was different. What we were hearing about that was happening under male-identified leadership was different. And just to explain to any listeners, so the process that we used was we reached out to about forty dance leaders, male-identified dance leaders, sent out emails explaining, hey, we're thinking about doing this and this is roughly what it would look like. And if you're interested, let us know. We'll have a initial conversation. So I had those initial conversations and got together a bunch of feedback, and that's what I gave to B.K. and Douglas for them to massage and turn into the series. So we partially did that because we wanted to try to create some safety for people. We weren't sure whether they would be open to the idea, if they might feel threatened by it, or uncomfortable with it. And we thought that if we get them on the phone talking about it, it might be easier to understand that this is really about transformation and positive change. So we hired B.K. and Douglas to design and deliver that and they're here with us. So I want to turn it over to you two. Now this one is still very much in motion, so they're still in the process of designing it and the first rollout is going to be early June. So for our listeners, could you give a sort of broad summary of some of the key themes that you're planning to cover from what you know so far? Recognizing this is currently still in iteration?

Douglas Stewart [00:22:37] I mean, I would say that if I look at some of the key themes overall, what we're trying to do is enhance, because I think, you know, you're hearing that quite a few of the folks are coming in with kind of a sort of openness that when levels of awareness, they're sort of on a continuum, even as all of them are on a spectrum, each are on a continuum of their own understanding and exploration of these issues, which is why they were attracted to engage with this process. And so I would say that what we're trying to do is enhance their self-awareness, create some deeper understanding of the issues, create some comfort, confidence, competence, you know, skills and tools, and then creating opportunity to practice and problem solve, explore, reflect, connect, network, and possibly create. Right? So we feel like we're less, you know, creating this curriculum of content to, you know, sort of present to folks, but really to engage them in what many of them said that they wanted rather than didactic process, one where they could feel that they're with their colleagues kind of problem-solving or reflecting together and really being in a community of how they engage. Right? So in some of that, some of them flagged an interest in, you know, trying to imagine a future of dance and what it could look like and how it can shift and what the leadership role would be in that. And then in that conversation would be to explore the nuances of power and power within the industry, including things like the role of boards and organizations. So it's not just them as individuals, but how those boards define and inform, you know, what the industry looks like and even how their companies function and address the kinds of issues that we're talking about. And so that's within their organizations, within the industry, within the art form, but also within their roles and particularly within their lives. And then really wanting to explore skills building. So some things that have been surfaced so far: conflict resolution, communication, deep listening, how they apply theory and language. And then there's a real interest from folks to, you know, create together. That they



want to... and it's sort of interesting because one of the challenges for B.K. and I will be, you know, now with COVID-19 restricting what this can look like... a lot of them were very interested in, you know, not just sitting in a room listening to folks, but they wanted to be active, moving around, have exercises, and they want to also create together. And so B.K. and I have been trying to figure out what that can look like.

Meg Saxby [00:25:02] Awesome. Thank you. I appreciate what you're saying, Douglas, about like people want to create together. I feel like that's such a positive, generative response. You know, like often a lot of the learning and training we do around sexual harassment, particularly, it's so compliance driven, it's so dry. It's puts people in this passive, fear-driven space. So I think approaching it as like, how do we help people create something positive together is just like awesome. B.K.?

B.K. Chan [00:25:28] I don't know how to phrase this, but so often trainings or offerings like this, assume that the people in the room have not done harm and would never do harm. And I'm hoping and I'm looking forward to this opportunity being different. This is a time to have this conversation that I hope actually, T.J., is helping everyone have more often. The conversation is: I might do harm and I might have done harm. And how might I face that within myself, how I face that among my peers and how what do I do now? Because so many of what we've heard is folks inadvertently misusing power or feeling like they don't have any options given, you know, time and resources, stress that, you know, harmful dynamics or abusive dynamics happen. And so I'm hoping that we have some of these brave conversations where we don't assume anything about anyone but that folks show up in a way that makes it possible to ask those questions of each other and of themselves.

Douglas Stewart [00:26:34] I'm hoping that what we can support and empower even is their sense of comfort and confidence to keep having these conversations with each other. You know, even if it's just that they have a network that checks in as follow up to this, but also how that could even sort of snowball into maybe inviting other men, even into sharing the experiences they had through this process in an ongoing way, because I think that they all have a key role as we know why we chose them in terms of to evolve the culture of dance. And I think that we know that that doesn't mean just let's have a few sessions and then, OK, let's go back to our corners, and do what we're doing. But how do we continue to have a collective conversation? And it might be that, even in this process, that some of the evaluation we think about, is there ways that this process, we can continue to support that, beyond the course and beyond the program.

Meg Saxby [00:27:20] So I want to ask you folks one or two last questions. Thank you for your participation in this conversation. So I want to ask about what support you would want to flag that T.J. practitioners need when doing this work, especially in organizations and institutions and workplaces.

B.K. Chan [00:27:38] Parts of this that have been particularly useful is the thought of having a community of practice, because as a practitioner, I run up against a lot of questions. What should I do? How do I... what is the right thing to do? Do I share this? Do I not share this? Is it



more important to be transparent versus is it more important to hold space? You know, like whose shoulder does this go on. So that's nice. Another practice that we've been invited to do on this project is to reflect and write. And I don't think I would have done that if I didn't commit to doing it. And I just keep thinking I got to do this for Meg. But it's really it's a process for me and for my process for the practice. So that's been really helpful to just reflect. And then I also thought, I mean, it still might happen that it depends on how we design the process, more than one facilitator will be necessary. So that's an obvious practical one.

Meg Saxby [00:28:43] Douglas. Anything you want to add on what T.J. facilitators need to do this work well?

Douglas Stewart [00:28:47] Well, the way I think about it is sort of when I think of the kind of tools that there was a reflection from some of the participants for case study three. And even just generally, I think even for myself, it's just I think that sense of are we in a community and a culture and an industry that buys in to the notion of this. Right? And so that you know, there is sort of echoing of these principles and values and ways of working, you know, sector wide so that it feels like, yeah, this is almost a definite go to for folks in terms of what is an option, what's available in terms of how we understand how we navigate these issues. Right. And even just our lives, because I think that one of the things about this is that it's not just transformative of industry, it is also individuals and how they see themselves. So if I think about, you know, Hirut's example and case study and of that situation where an individual from their own process could think about, so what's the collective look like? I think it is that notion of a collective kind of response that means that this... so when you think of tools that get created, so how do they support that? So is there policies in place? Are there protocols for when... and it doesn't have to be... I like the fact that we're moving away from something happens. Doesn't have to be something happens. It can be, how do we set the tone and create the environment? How do we also support people who might be feeling something about... I'm here and it feels... So nothing has happened or has happened yet. But I already am noticing or observing. The whole idea of we support bystanders. Right? The idea of that... so it may not be happening to me, but I'm aware of seeing dynamics and ways of even just somebody's Tone. And I mean, I think of Bill 168 violence in the workplace when that came out. Right? And one of the conversations we had to have was how do we think about violence and how we understand and notice violence. So violence doesn't have to be somebody attacking somebody physically. But if somebody is slamming doors or is banging on tables or using a certain tone of voice or seeming to isolate certain people. Right? So how do we pay attention? Notice what's going on in the environment that means that, you know, anyone can then say, oh, I think this might be an opportunity here for us to have some conversations and look at what's going on. And I think for us, in terms of where power lies, it's about how to support leadership in that. And what are those tools that leadership would need to be able to also frame the environment, but also critically, anybody would need to be able to understand that it's an option that they have and I think would be good to also think about and reflect on. So if a company or an organization doesn't have that commitment, how do we support an industry where at least individuals in industry understand there's somewhere to go? So it might not be within my



organization because organization may not be there yet. But can I come here? Like people did for these case studies. Right? Are there other resources? Right? And to think about the resources that we've sort of, you know, mobilized in how we've been working with folks. Is there ways to keep that ongoing and sustainable in some way?

Meg Saxby [00:31:58] I'm just wondering while we have our facilitator brains in the room. From your perspectives, so for each case, we had about eleven thousand dollars, about half of which went to the Participant Wellbeing Fund and about half of which paid for the facilitator fees. Was that a useful way of thinking about the work? Was there any third or fourth or fifth categories that we missed? For any one who's trying to recreate something like this in the future, or put it in place. Obviously, in all cases it's useful to have more resources rather than less. I think that one goes without saying. But was there any particular kind of resource that was necessary to do the work?

B.K. Chan [00:32:38] I'm thinking about, you know, resources connected to, you know, just geography. Right. So it's when I started to think about this project, I just assumed that everyone was in the same place and they were in the same place and will continue to be in the same place. And so it was just a matter of choice, whether we bring people into a room or not. But so then the idea of, well, transportation for getting people to a same physical space might be an issue. And so I can imagine that resources would be needed for that. And imagining time, if this means people have to be away from their jobs or their families in order to attend to a circle or any kind of process like that. So that sort of came up. And then we also did some creative flexing around costs, around meeting. Right. So in lieu of a very formalized meeting space, my participant and I, it was more comfortable for them to meet in a public space that had, you know, privacy enough for us to chat, but public enough for us to be in public. So things like that doesn't have a dollar amount attached to it, but it is one of the considerations that I hadn't thought of. I also want to add that specifically, the Wraparound Fund has practically been very useful. So when I'm working with someone around the issues so often there is something else to be done that like is healing or release or talking. You know, that that requires not somebody in my role, so it's actually helpful to feel like we are actually part of a team. And so that the participant can feel empowered to seek support in their own way. And I don't imagine that I have to be the access point to everything. So I think it also levels out some of the power between us that I'm just one of the gears in this machine that the participant is mostly directing. Putting a dollar amount to that really helps, I think just to have that option and to imagine this is the landscape.

Meg Saxby [00:35:13] Thanks for joining us for episode three of the TransformDance podcast. If you'd like to learn more about the context of dance, tune into episode one. If you'd like to hear more about the experience of our participants, you can check out episode number two. For more on the logistics of how we made it work, what the budget was like, what the timelines were like, what process steps we took. You can see a written report on the Generator website at generatorto.com/transform-dance. Thanks for listening.



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