

# Can young dancers bounce back after too much Zoom university?

*When the social aspect of dance was gone, motivation was hard to come by*

by Alyssa Rubio

When the COVID-19 pandemic halted everyone's lives in 2020, no one was able to go to work, to school, to the store, or go anywhere socially, for a majority of the year. Everyone had to live their entire lives from their home in isolation. Our source of social interaction depended on our virtual platforms, such as facetime, social media, and meeting platforms like Zoom, which quickly took over our school and work spaces.

As a dancer, being able to access dance classes through Zoom was a convenience; you were able to get to class without the struggle of commuting and not worry about coming in contact with someone who was sick. It was convenient, but I feel as though this extended amount of time of only being able to dance on Zoom has set back dancers in their future dance endeavors. For one thing, dancing only in living rooms created multiple problems. Dancers not only were working in hazardous spaces, they no longer had the social aspect associated with dance; they lacked motivation to attend classes and no longer could feel the body-consuming energy that comes with taking an in-person class.

When virtual learning started, dancers rushed to buy squares of marley and barres to create their own home dance spaces. For me and many others this was not sufficient. I found myself rearranging my room every other week to find the furniture arrangement that allowed me the most room to dance. Unable to relocate to a larger room in my house, due to family, I was constantly struggling to complete combinations without whacking into the walls or furniture. Every week, I would have new bruises and cuts on my body. On top of that, I found that my body was getting tighter and tighter as the weeks went on, because I was unable to fully stretch in my space and was not getting the right attention my body needed. Not being able to dance fully for so long, I feel as though my technique and artistry has not improved at all and may have even deteriorated.

Then there was the problem of privacy. I live at home with my family of 6 other people, and the number of times someone walked in to disturb my classes is uncountable. They became my social aspect of dance classes. While dancing on Zoom I would also be having a conversation about what we would be eating for dinner. I would be questioned by my younger siblings as to why I was dancing in my room! I was dancing in an environment completely unfit for a moving body.

Dance has always allowed people to find groups that they can connect with and build a family with. With Zoom, instead of dancing with your friends all day and creating a fun-loving environment, you were dancing by yourself staring at your friends through a screen. Dancers were unable to connect with their peers and teachers, and couldn't network other dancers. Growing up, going to dance was always an escape for me, getting to see my friends and not having to deal with whatever was going on in my life. Being on Zoom took this away. Dance had always been an outlet for me that made everything else disappear. I no longer had a place where I could dance without the fear of injuring myself.

I was constantly doubting my dancing abilities, and it got worse over time, because my technique was truly struggling from not being in the proper environment I needed to be motivated. Having a teacher correct you and critique you in a studio motivates you to work hard.

Of course, you have personal intrinsic motivators, but it is most definitely hard to run on those for such a long period of time. There was a point where I wondered why I was even dancing. I felt so alone doing something that used to make me feel so engaged with others. Suddenly, it felt foreign to be dancing. It had become a chore, not only to attend my mandatory classes, but to express my artistry in general. I questioned if I danced for the fun of it my whole life, or I truly did it because it's what felt good in my body physically and mentally.

Social media was not a huge help in this area. There were many posts of friends improvising artistically, or performing in screen dances, and I was not doing any of this, because I had no motivation to do so. Overall, my lack of motivation to dance set me back the most. Because I had no will to better myself in any way, I became lazy and felt like everything was a chore to accomplish. I found out that dancing in a social atmosphere is what fuels me and gives me that escape and artistic outlet. In dance classes there is an energy created in the room that cannot happen when dancing alone. Feeling the energy of all your peers and constant feedback from teachers really pushes dancers in a different way to create something with other artistic voices. Seeing others push themselves to their fullest potential makes you want to do your best, putting you in a different headspace.

For a long time, dancers were unable to perform on stage, which is what many dancers dance for, the pure moment of being on stage and getting to showcase our abilities and express things that we are unable to say. If Zoom had made the dance world better, I don't think we would all be so eager to go back to in-person experiences. The dance world as a whole has struggled tremendously, especially economically, by not being able to conduct in-person shows, intensives and classes. Working at a private dance studio, I saw that many dancers of different levels had quit because the dancing on Zoom became a chore to them. Our records indicated that many quit after dancing on Zoom for just a few weeks. Some stuck it out for the remainder of the year, finishing off with their first online recital.

Although Zoom did create spaces for many people to excel and find themselves in new ways as dancers, I believe the negative effects outweigh the positive ones. We were able to work with people from around the world, but we did not get to connect with them as we would in person. We were able to challenge ourselves to make new artistic choices in small spaces, but in return we may have lost technique due to the lack of space. Our motivation to dance was challenged—will we ever recover from asking this question of why we dance?

At this time in my life I am getting ready to start my professional dance career in hopes of joining a dance company. Over the past year I was unable to attend workshops and classes with different master teachers that I could possibly make connections with. Now, I'm having to take the year after my graduation to seek these opportunities, delaying my goal of joining a company post-graduation.

As we phased back into in-person classes, I struggled with exhaustion. I pushed myself to participate in every in-person experience I got and expected more out of myself, since I lost over a year of dance. I slowly found myself in my dancer's body again and decided never again to take for granted the chance to dance in a room with others.

*Alyssa Rubio graduated from University of California Irvine in the Spring of 2022. She hopes to join a contemporary based concert dance company and, later, to pursue a career in Physical Therapy.*