

All Together, Everywhere: Community & Creativity

By Kate Conklin

Fulbright Student,

Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts, Plovdiv, 2002-2003

"What would I create if I could create anything?" I asked myself this in 2018 and knew immediately what my answer was: to design a foundational educational program for extraordinary performers that gave them essential information about how humans think, move, and thrive. Once they had worked with the material on their own, I would coach them in their particular discipline, in front of their colleagues, so that we could all be together from every part of the world, learning from each other with a shared foundation. Doing this in a group format would be immersive, efficient, and joyful.

Coaching my clients individually I often thought, "What a crime that I am the only one seeing this! I have this community of performers, doing trapeze in Australia, fire dancing in Bali – but I'm the only one who gets to see it!" I wanted these amazing performers to be together, and this was the way to do it. And we would do it all online.

I had coached performers online for years. I knew how powerful it could be. You need to be self-reliant,

articulate your process, and observe and analyze the quality of what you and others are doing. In fact, *I was beginning to think it was a superior way to learn.* But there were concerns:

Elite performers often don't want any part of group training. They often have a history with group learning being ineffective, slow, unable to provide a community consummate with their skill level. I know this, because 1) They tell me, and 2) It's exactly what I experienced myself.

They won't pay for it. Performers already pay for coaches and training and have been doing so for most of their lives. They are wary of new ways to spend money, and more interested in ways to make it.

They don't think they need it. Performers have lots of training. But it wasn't about creating more training, it was about appropriate, useful training that they could innovate on forever. I knew they didn't already have this, but they likely didn't know it.



Kate coaching opera singer/aerialist Rainelle Krause in the aerial gym on singing upside down

They wouldn't go for an online program. The work in acoustics, human movement, and performance training I was proposing has historically been done in person, and there is a belief that it can only be done this way. This antiquated view would have to be transformed. So, now what? There was only one way forward: make a plan, do the experiment, see what happens.

I explained what I had in mind. I told them they would be grouped with people comparable to their skill, career, and quality of feedback they could offer. I gave them, and myself, full freedom to quit anytime. We got started. And as one participant put it: "When Kate first approached me about her Foundations Course, I was skeptical. I wasn't entirely sure I needed something 'foundational.' I'm happy to eat my words. It's been a wonderful community to connect with. I wish I could give this experience to everyone!" Madison Smith, Soprano Sydney.

We've done nine consecutive courses since then, with four more planned for this year. We've had performers from Cirque du Soleil to Broadway, to The Metropolitan Opera to The Grand Ole Opry. People have had babies, been married, made their European debut, written books, changed careers, gotten their dream gigs, and gone to Bulgaria on a Fulbright Scholarship. I developed and launched a comprehensive, online Bulgarian Singing Course, and recently

did an interview (remotely!) for BTV in Bulgaria. And now we're sharing the experience of this pandemic together.

The courses I've created are based on the idea that all life has a design that is essential and inherent, and that we thrive when we cooperate with that design:

- We are whole. We are adaptable.
- We are creative.
- We are resilient.
- We are responsive.
- We are interconnected.

We are *designed* to affect each other. A book by an author who is deceased can change your mood, your body temperature, your life. We have relationships with people we've never met — though sometimes it's invisible to us. In the case of the current pandemic, this could not be clearer, and the stakes could not be higher.

When we tell ourselves we are *distant* and *alone*, we are designed to attempt to live out our belief, we live a NO. When we tell ourselves we are *together*, interconnected in extraordinary circumstances, our entire system responds to a YES. When we try to be separate, we go out of harmony, out of coordination. When we choose to be *together in a particular way*, harmony and coordination are restored.



The Human Movement and Design Course, studying optimal coordination using bellydancing as an étude

Rebecca Richardson, soprano; Anita Lyons, soprano; Emma Barrett-Robles, singer, fire dancer, hoop artist

In any predicament, there is opportunity. My coaching moved entirely online in 2018 because my predicament was that my artists were all over the world, and I wanted them to be together. The same tools used for "distancing" are the tools we use to be together. In this extraordinary time of this global pandemic, we have an established haven — a community that is connected and resilient.

Now, on a Tuesday in April, 2020, we are getting together for a coaching — as we've done for the last one hundred and twenty weeks. We will sing, spin, laugh—we will make plans, do experiments, and see what happens. It's familiar, it's constructive, it's creative. It's how we get together, every week, everywhere. What would you create, if you could create anything?



About the Author

Kate Conklin is a soprano and an interpreter of the highly demanding vocal music of Bulgaria. For two years, Kate was the vocalist for Cirque du Soleil's "O." In AY2002-2003, Kate was a Fulbright Student Researcher to Bulgaria, where she rehearsed and performed as a member of the Academic Folk Choir of the Plovdiv Academy of Music, developing her work in regional solo repertoire, choral literature, conducting and pedagogy. She is releasing an album of Bulgarian vocal music in 2020. Kate sings in seventeen languages and is known for her playful gravitas. More information at kateconklin.com