
Making Space for Somatic Practice in Higher Education

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Introduction

It is heartening to acknowledge that in recent years somatic practice has been given a rightful place in the curriculum of a number of undergraduate dance courses. As an advocate and facilitator of somatic education this paper has been designed to address the significance of its inclusion, especially with regards to its value of nurturing dance technique, creative play and personal artistry in performance.

In the 21st century a definition of somatic is quite difficult because according to Green (2002 p1121) "*the term is not a monolith*", meaning that many practitioners, therapists, artists, educators do not use it in the same way. Fortin (2002, p128) suggests a generic description of somatic as an "...*umbrella term used to assemble experiential bodily practices that privilege subjective experience*". It is Hanna, who first coined the term somatic in 1976 and he suggested that somatic theory views the body as perceived from the first person perspective. Hanna differentiates information perceived from a subjective experience as being different to that from data experienced from a third person perspective. He describes subjective experience as a way of looking at oneself from the inside out where one becomes aware of feelings, sensations and intentions rather than looking objectively from the outside in.

This method of working from the inside out is often new to students who have embarked on a vocational or degree course in dance. Often traditional methods of teaching dance - especially

dance technique - focus on the acquisition of skills with the teacher demonstrating. This inadvertently leads students to becoming a representational body relying on extrinsic motivation and guidance. The teacher and the mirror determine success and progress. For so long this has been the dominant pedagogue and for many reasons it is rare that students are helped with becoming aware of inner sensations and how these can aid with learning and improvement unique to the individual. More often than not I witness a few students who in their first year of study arrive in the studio with an innate acuity and physical facility to build on what they already have, however the majority appear with habitual patterns that have led to poor posture and technique and they are inhibited and physically tight and tense; it is these students, according to Smith who (in Girard 2007, p22) "...*need to work on where they are before attempting to learn techniques*". What Smith is suggesting is that building on corporeal misuse will hinder possibilities and limit progress. Of course, the majority of dance students do have the potential to become aware of and to improve their own physical makeup and movement range, however we have to ensure that we can offer a variety of methods and dance practices to help and guide the student towards recognising and cultivating their potential. Providing a range of approaches also ensures that an assortment of learning styles is considered and that the student is supported with becoming a versatile artist.

Those who work in the field of somatic education trust that this is an approach that can aid a student with experiencing a personal insight into their body. With a growing somatic knowledge students can understand and acknowledge their dysfunctional postures and movement habits, so over time the learning process is understood to be one of re-education and of re-programming.

The pedagogy of somatic practice focuses on a number of methods - such as improvisation, use of imagery, visualisation whilst lying on the floor, hands on partner work, use of visual aids and other materials - all assist with being able to sense and correct poor alignment and movement technicalities, be they when static or when moving through space, and so a new sensory appreciation is experienced. When compared with a traditional dance technique class this is a very different way of working. Usually shape, positioning, rhythmic, spatial and dynamic accuracy are the goals, whereas in the somatic class sensing whilst moving is. The objective of moving with awareness involves helping a student to understand the nature of habit and thought, so they begin to appreciate that consciousness matters: a process that I refer to as an awakening of the self. A somatic class also differs to a traditional class in that it allows for time to attend to the soma in a quiet, non-rushed and gentle way. Often periods of activity are followed by a time of rest. This way of working is considered to be conducive to learning in a non pressured and calm environment which is thought to contribute to being able to engage in the process of self-listening and self-regulating.

According to Myers (1986, p46) a somatic approach to learning requires a "...different kind of discipline and patience... It takes a willingness to suspend one's assumptions about how movement, especially one's own, ought to go". Is this not at the core of all education? Where we create

openness for learners to go beyond simply knowing and accepting how to do something they have learnt. That we stimulate curiosity, and provide gateways for moving away from the familiar and predictable so that learners have an opportunity to move safely towards the unpredictable and unknown. And by doing so we enable students to gradually find a voice of their own and have a real sense of agency through which they are willing to take risks confidently with their academic and practice - based endeavours. In the context of somatic practice, Myer's words resonate with a pedagogy that celebrates autonomy, individuality, and which cultivates a learner who has both creative movement intelligence and an articulate voice.

Often the art of performance is related to an event where an audience is present or when a dance work is being rehearsed in preparation for its showing. Perhaps this is because artistic expression is not always fully integrated into a dance technique class or creative workshops and yet this is an essential combination. We all know that improving technical skills does not inherently develop personal artistry. Yes, key pioneers of modern codified dance techniques such as, Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey wrote and discussed the nature of performance in terms of intention and having presence but the essence of how to aid the dancer with moving away from the quantifiable doing of a dance to the qualitative being of it is rarely touched upon. I put forward that this position of being within the dance lies in helping the dance student to form a deep connection to the whole self (physically, sensually, spiritually, emotionally, cognitively), and to self with other, and to the environment in which we all live. So therefore relating and being able to access and tune into feelings and perceptions culminate in an empathetic and expressive performance. When appreciating a dance performer it is generally agreed that an expressive, artistic performance is one that

touches our soul, that inspires us and which stirs something within us. Is it possible to find - or do some of us feel that we have found already - a methodological approach that helps nurture aesthetic sensibility so that the student dancer can interpret and communicate movement expressively be it when they improvise or perform set material?

I am one of those educators who promotes that a somatic way of learning and knowing is significant in helping a dance student to experience movement and dance as an embodied presence. Essentially, the nature of embodiment and presence is of course temporal in that the performer is fully involved in the lived moment of performance, and this can only occur if dancers are consciously aware of the decisions they are making. Self-listening, body awareness and conscious intention through to action are practices that must have a place in curriculum design if we really believe in nurturing, developing and educating artistry in performance.

The renowned Canadian performer and teacher Peggy Baker aligns presence with energy. She says (in Beaulieu 1996, p67)

"I think what we're responding to in a person is their energy. When the energy is moving freely as a form of expression through their body (it goes) out into space with great presence. When the energy is locked inside, they can be a good dancer but they don't really have a lot of presence".

A number of somatic practices focus on helping the individual to experience a flow of energy travelling within the self and of sending this energy out into space rather than it being contained and trapped within spaces of the anatomical self. This method of becoming aware of one's own energy and "inner landscape of spaces" is certainly true of the somatic practice Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT).

In SRT (and other practices), hands on partner work is an exchange of energy for it is about sensing one's own energy whilst tuning into another's. In this context the act of sensing the self whilst also relating to another is helping to awaken kinaesthetic awareness so that the felt sensation is immediate, focused and meaningful. Images and activities related to the flow of energy and of the "inner landscape of spaces opening" run through most of the fifteen introductory level SRT classes, for example in class # one students are introduced to an image of "streams of energy" and in class # four to focusing on "spaces inside". Proceeding classes continue to explore "inner spaces opening whilst moving" and "directional patterns of energy" both as solo and partner work. These images become deeper and more complex as the classes progress so that by class # ten an image is given of "pure energy" being drawn in through the hands and feet and "into the energy circuits of the physical self".

These activities and images from SRT classes exemplify how somatic learning can help with experiencing the intentionality of dance with pure energy and presence whilst at the same time creative and imaginative play is combined with achieving technical principles of maximum ease of movement, a multi-dimensional alignment (and awareness) and suspending and expanding into space, to name but a few.

As this paper has revealed, I firmly believe in methods that encourage a deepening of understanding body and self - awareness, however, inevitably, there will always be educators who are suspicious of alternative methods of education and who are sceptical - or even afraid - of the spontaneous, process led and sensory nature of somatic practice. How can we help and support those who are not convinced of the educational value of its inclusion? Fortin (2008) suggests that it is important to address values that guide practices, and that these could

be approached through curriculum design, by asking questions such as: What is worth knowing? Who decides? And in whose interest is it? I suggest we also engage in a dialogue that moves us towards developing ways in which traditional and somatic approaches can begin to connect and work together in a complementary way. Rather than viewing differences and hearing a plurality of voices perhaps we should collaborate and move in the direction of creating a shared language whilst appreciating shared values of practice, which can only result in a cohesive and well - balanced curriculum. Not only will this cultivate versatile artists but also it will aid students with transference of learning whilst also challenging educators to create a new methodology.

It is also important to say that there are now numerous UK resident dance makers and performers whose work is informed by internal sourcing, in particular artists such as Gaby Agis, Andrea Buckley, Carol Brown, Rosemary Butcher, Gill Clarke, Siobhon Davies, Rosemary Lee, Florence Peake, Joseph Moran, Kirstie Simson, Miranda Tufnell, Lucia Walker and Simon Whitehead, to name but a small selection. Across the UK there are regular classes and laboratory environments that focus on somatic practices and creating work from the reference point of the self, such as the collective Falling Wide and Independent Dance, which is an artist led organisation that offers classes that encourage the individual "...to wake up to the present moment and to our strength, awareness and pleasure in dancing" (www.independentdance.co.uk).

In light of the above, if we are to really inform our students and make them aware of current practices and prepare them for this part of the dance industry, then it would seem only fair that we begin to integrate, rather than separate, the practice of somatic approaches in education.

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