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THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD



In this short article I discuss some strategies in the educational method focused on learning and movement known as the Feldenkrais Method. This was created by the engineer and physicist (also a judo teacher), Mosche Feldenkrais (1904-1984). I will show how this Method can impact upon creative practice referring to the ways in which this was articulated at two conferences held at the University of West London in 2016 and 2017.

Who was Feldenkrais?

In Volume 1 of his new magisterial biography, which only covers the period up to 1951, Mark Reese, a practitioner of the method, chronicles Feldenkrais's youth, his learning to fight on the streets of Palestine, his studies in judo and in mechanical and electrical engineering in Paris, and his work in the laboratories of Joliot-Curie and on the Van de Graaff generator (used in atomic fission experiments). He details Feldenkrais's escape from the Nazis in 1940, his work for the British admiralty, and his move to the new state of Israel. There he later famously trained the first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. After the publication of a picture of Ben-Gurion on the beach at Tel-Aviv, the journalist Meyer Levin published an article about Feldenkrais in *The Jerusalem Post* entitled 'The Man who stood the Prime Minister on his head'. Ben-Gurion and Feldenkrais were lifelong friends, and he even tried to found a University in Israel that would specifically study Feldenkrais's work.

Reese's book contains many details and insights gleaned from students and colleagues of Feldenkrais, some anthropology of the method (Feldenkrais's extensive reading of Freud, for example), and the way his ideas on early childhood development parallel those of Esther Thelen and Linda Smith's 'Dynamic Systems Approach' to infant human development. Feldenkrais's work with such luminaries as Yehudi Menuhin, Narciso Yepes, Igor Markevitch, Peter Brook, and his engagements with Margaret Mead and Karl Pribram would come later.

Feldenkrais's first five books were on judo, 'grounded', as Reese states, 'in physics, biology, psychology, and neuroscience' (Reese, 2015: 231). These areas feed into the method, but I have chosen to define Feldenkrais as a somatic educationalist. The reasons for this are manifold. Firstly, all of Feldenkrais's other activities culminate in one profound activity, the creation of what has come to be known as The Feldenkrais Method. Secondly, Feldenkrais's work with ordinary people as well as those with profound disabilities such as cerebral palsy (Feldenkrais, 2007) or stroke victims (Feldenkrais, 1993) addresses their human potential and their neuroplastic ability to change and heal themselves through their body.

The Feldenkrais Method seeks to provide the ideal learning conditions through which the motor cortex of the individual can be re-wired



Top:

Mosche Feldenkrais Judo throw sequence
© International Feldenkrais® Federation Archive

Middle:

Ben Gurion handstand © Paul Goldman

Right:

Moshe Feldenkrais Circa 1957
© International Feldenkrais® Federation Archive



Thirdly, the method that he created seeks to provide the ideal learning conditions through which the motor cortex of the individual can be re-wired. It is 'not' a set of 'exercises' or 'something you repeat until you get tired' as Feldenkrais opined. This is why Feldenkrais always said that he was not a teacher but someone who provided conditions for learning.

The Feldenkrais Method

Through his method, Feldenkrais was able to achieve remarkable things, most recently beautifully documented in Norman Doidge's bestselling book *The Brain's Way of Healing*. Doidge (2015) tells the story of Elizabeth, a girl missing a third of her cerebellum, a part of the brain at the base of the skull that is intimately involved in motor control, attention and language. Feldenkrais worked with her from the age of 13 months. From a prognosis of 'profound retardation', Feldenkrais, aware of her potential and progress, eventually told her father: 'She will dance at her wedding'. Today, Elizabeth has two graduate degrees... and yes, she danced at her wedding (Doidge, 2015: 188-95).

At the heart of this method are many strategies and I will only refer to a few of them here. The design of these strategies is to facilitate effortless movement and a range, choice and comfort in movement through an organic learning. The purpose of this learning, as with the case of Elizabeth, is to change a person's self-image, an image formed perhaps by injury, but in 'healthy' people by habit, one's awareness of oneself in space and with relation to gravity, and of course to what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called 'the big Other' – that is, the unspoken desires and prohibitions of society that form the crucible of human development. In a utopian vein, Feldenkrais believed that if he could change a person's self-image, and this could change the world.

So, what is the self-image? Feldenkrais defines it through the body but goes on to show that it not just the unique identification of oneself in gravity, in proprioceptive space, but most importantly in the sense in which we feel that our own particular way of doing something – walking, speaking, thinking, or playing a musical instrument for example – is sensed as uniquely our own and unchangeable (Feldenkrais, 2010: 3). Therein lies the difficulty of



Above and below:

Mosche Feldenkrais at Amhers © International Feldenkrais® Federation Archive





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changing habit and the feeling that it was formed by accident (Feldenkrais, 1977: 20).

What does Feldenkrais mean in practice

The significance of this idea can be shown by examining the method through an ordinary activity. Think about how you brush your teeth. Do you always do this in the same place and at the same time? Do you always use your dominant hand? Do you scrub them hard and lean towards the bathroom mirror? Do you contract the muscles around your eyes, and neck as if doing something really hard? Does brushing your teeth forcefully give you some kind of perverse sense of reward? What this example shows is something that Feldenkrais stressed in his teaching: not only are learning and comfort necessary for progress, but as a precursor to this, humans need to learn to be comfortable and kind to themselves. This is why, after Freud, Feldenkrais wrote that one should not follow the religious, 'superego' injunction to 'love one's neighbor as oneself'; what he meant, rather, was that one needs to learn how to love oneself first, and only then can love for another be uncompromised (Feldenkrais, 1985, xxxvii-xl).

So, returning to the bathroom... Do you change your breathing in brushing your teeth? Next time you do this, pay attention to yourself: is this the only way to brush your teeth? If you had to brush someone else's teeth, would you treat them in the same way, or would you be nicer to them (nicer than you are to yourself)? Even in this activity, the physical and psychological are grounded in the embodied experience. One of the profound lessons to be learnt from this is that just by paying attention to what one does with one's body, or 'listening' as Feldenkrais stated, one can not only make a profound change in the tonus (the level of muscular excitation) of one's body (and therefore in the quality of movement), but to the sense of quality (and enjoyment) that can be experienced through any activity.

In brushing their teeth, most people use one side of themselves; Feldenkrais was fascinated with bodily asymmetry and many of his individual and group lessons – which is the way the method is taught – worked with one side to reveal the difference that can be created. This has also become a major source of research (McManus, 2004). Feldenkrais worked

with one side of the body to show the difference between the two sides, and this then allowed that learning to be absorbed or 'integrated' by the other side. Using one side of the body involves one side of the spine more than the other, breathing with one lung more than the other, and using one eye more than the other.

To notice such a difference, and to make a change in habitual behaviour, Feldenkrais made use of the Weber-Fechner law. This law relates the amount of effort in an activity to sensitivity. So, in an example given by Feldenkrais's himself that dramatises this law, he explains this in the following way: 'If I lifted a bull, I would have to contract my muscles so much and use so much effort that I would not be able to tell the difference between whether the bull had peed or not. However, if I lifted a feather and a fly landed on it, I might be able to sense the difference in weight'. To make such a differentiation in brushing one's teeth is to realise that this activity requires perhaps less effort than one might give it. Feldenkrais's (Feldenkrais, 2013) readings of Émile Coué (Coué, 2006) also brought him to understand the uselessness of effort and willpower and the importance of awareness.

To pay attention and notice a difference, to become aware, is to make a differentiation that leads to learning. When asked what good teaching was, in what is probably the last book of conversations, the great French composer and conductor Pierre Boulez stated that it 'must have the function of a detonation, and for this to happen, there must be a detonator, but also an explosive charge' (Archimbaud, 2016: 99). Feldenkrais's teaching provides a means of creating the gentlest but also the most potent 'detonation' – the surprise that one does not have to live in the same way, do things in the same way, or be the same person. There is a choice, and this choice, Feldenkrais maintained, is a basic human right.

For musicians and creative artists, people who 'practise' their art, the process of this essentially auto-didactic activity of differentiation is encapsulated by one of Feldenkrais's favourite statements. He often stated that his method was 'to make the impossible possible, the possible easy and comfortable, and the comfortable aesthetically pleasurable' (Feldenkrais, 1975). This is what creative people do every day.

One of Feldenkrais's favourite statements about his method was 'to make the impossible possible, the possible easy and comfortable, and the comfortable aesthetically pleasurable'

Contemporary applications of the Feldenkrais method

In this context, I have now co-organised two conferences with a UWL colleague Marcia Carr, on the Feldenkrais Method, but I will here chiefly refer to the event in 2016. The conference was entitled *'Making the Impossible Possible': The Feldenkrais Method in Music, Dance, Movement and the Creative Practice*. Speakers came from around the world – North and South America, Australia, Europe as well as colleagues from the University. This in itself is testament to the spread of Feldenkrais's thought, but what was most pleasing, and what in many ways represents a great continuity of Feldenkraisian thought, was the welcome unorthodoxy of the approaches discussed. This, I think, shows something profoundly potent about Feldenkrais's thought; it is intellectually malleable, durable and is a hinge for the advancement of thought and practice for the mutual benefit of those who use it.

One of the pleasures of forming a Feldenkrais event is in the non-homogeneity, diversity, and a sense of 'going with the flow' that could come both from the presenters and from the audience. Feldenkrais gives permission for a certain kind of rigorous sensitivity to occur. This was demonstrated in the first session where Paolo Maccagno showed how the idea of a constriction or a barrier (like a whiteout) provides a form of educational impetus to find another educational path. The three presenters of the second session, Iaci Moraes Lomonaco, Larissa Padula Ribeiro da Fonseca and Beatriz Kaysel, had a little trouble with the technology. They had come along way, so after a break to allow these problems to be sorted out, the audience, came back to a startling performance that applied the idea of restriction, of stopping and changing direction (one of Feldenkrais's strategies is that of making a constriction which forces the body to do less, or create an alternative, or non-habitual, form of action). This demonstration of constriction (and its overcoming) was followed by a presentation of Ingrid Weisfelt's film *Intimacy*. This film documents how the limitations of a dancer suffering of multiple sclerosis can actually become the enabling properties of great expressive movement.

Libby Worth's keynote discussed how the

Feldenkrais Method can ease and enhance cross-disciplinary communication through an investigation of stability, a shift in self-image and the re-direction of focus from 'correction' of, to curiosity about one's movements. So often education can be about judgment rather than being a safe space for exploring possibilities, learning through trial and error and staying focused through inquisitive interaction with material. Feldenkrais brings with it a salutary reminder of the curious mindset and the need, for novice and the experienced alike, to begin again.

Corinna Eikmeier is a cellist who is partially sighted, and her work explores precisely this possibility through improvisation. She reported on some enlivening research that facilitates musicianship and expression through quasi-controlled experiments in improvisation. Her work therefore focuses on the dialectic between inner sensation and action, between an inner attitude while playing music, and the perception, listening, and the willingness to completely embrace the present situation. This is important because in mainstream education, judgment often means that too much of the focus in assessing learning is on the result rather than the process, or even in the incremental improvement made by students. Marilla Homes, a lyric soprano who teaches at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, then gave a lively and amusing account of exactly how students can think through the process of self-judgment and come to appreciate the uniqueness and malleability of their own gifts. Lisa Burrell then gave a memorable demonstration (with video evidence) of how the Feldenkrais Method can be a lifeline for the health of artists, and how it can change bodies and lives.

In the final session, Marcia Carr gave an entertaining exposition of how Feldenkrais can be used in a collaborative teaching environment for the training of the actors/singers at the University. She showed how the method provides a hinge for the development of the reflective (or 'self-thinking') performer, a performer who is ready for the challenges and spontaneity required in the 'marketplace'. Finally Jessica M. Beck emphasised the cultivation of a state of perpetual readiness offered by the method, challenging fixed notions of self-image in the rehearsal processes of performing artists.





Responses to the conference

We had very positive feedback from delegates, including some undergraduate students. The event was, in the words of a delegate: 'wide-ranging, stimulating and very encouraging.' Central to the day according another attendee was:

Performing and narrating the self, and the place of awareness in an actor's self-development as a person in parallel to their development as a performer. To borrow ideas from Laban, much of the training of a performer is to promote the free flow of inspiration and skill. But what happens when actors meet their limit, professionally or personally – when that flow is broken or at least bound? The excellent presentations from the musicianship side of things addressed this in fascinating ways for me and made the link to the performing-arts medicine world.

The March 2017 conference invited creative practitioners in music, dance and drama to consider how the method provides a means and an educational impetus to find new, alternative and engaging beginnings for research, teaching and practice.

The keynote speaker was the pianist and practitioner Alan Fraser from Canada who has published several books applying the Feldenkrais Method to piano technique and who works with pianists and other musicians, both those who are healthy and those suffering from focal dystonia, tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome and other pain issues. His research shows that improved physical organisation can enhance every aspect of musical performance, from sonority, agility, phrase shaping and emotional expression to the quick resolution of most pain problems. These conferences show that this is a research area ripe for development. Feldenkrais was proud of his achievement, but he was always open to the idea that other people could improve upon what he did. He often said: 'there is no end to improvement', and these conferences fully endorse this optimistic stance.

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