

Developing movement skills in performing arts: an investigation to stimulate a more creative, imaginative and sensitive movement skill engagement through a democratically orientated approach.

The presentation discusses research which investigates how dance teaching practice and pedagogy can be adapted to stimulate creative, imaginative and sensitive movement skills in students studying performing arts, by adopting a more democratic approach.

The research has two objectives. Firstly, to establish a mode of interaction which is modelled on the democratically oriented process in Jo Butterworth's didactic – democratic spectrum (2004, 55), between the teacher and students. Secondly, to develop a pedagogy which can be used in practical research on existing somatic practices, establishing a more democratically orientated process to develop movement skills, whilst encouraging students to become independent and engaged learners.

The research which involves students aged 16 - 18 years takes the form of a case study. This method has been chosen, as the cyclical nature provides a means in which myself and the participants can improve understanding of their practice, and which also provides a tool for 'self-reflective enquiry' (Carr and Kemmis cited in Cohen et al 2011, 227). In addition to the cyclical approach, a post-positivist framework is also used. The qualitative method of data collection, includes questionnaires, student/tutor written reflective journals and observation. However, these methods of data collection possess the potential for different types of errors, therefore emphasising the need for multiple measures and the requirement of triangulation. Students participate in classes which take the format of an introduction to somatic technique, short physical warm ups, dance technique and creative movement tasks. The data collected is then referenced to Butterworth's didactic – democratic spectrum (2004, 55) this provides a means to guide student engagement whilst also promoting the understanding of a range of somatic approaches. The outcome of the research being to make dance pedagogy more relevant to the (21st, by changing the role and perception of the teacher from deliverer to facilitator. Therefore, encouraging students to become independent learners, driving their own learning beyond what is taught in the dance studio, and taking ownership of their work.

To understand a little about my research, it is important to understand some background knowledge to somatic techniques. Derived from the Greek word 'soma', meaning 'the living organism in its wholeness', to understand human beings, as beings integrated in mind, body and spirit. However, the term 'somatic' or embodiment, was coined by Thomas Hanna in the 1970's as an umbrella term to bring together the various somatic techniques for example, Feldenkrais Technique, Alexander Technique, Rolfing and Body Mind Centering (BMC), along with the more familiar methods of Pilates and yoga all under one rubric. Somatics is a methodology in which somatic practitioners can embody transformation both individually and collectively, through an embodied transformation that is identified in the persons/participants actions, ways of being, and relating and perceiving information.

Somatic practice has in the past been perceived as being a 'soft' practice and therefore not 'legitimately worthy of being a 'dance technique' (Batson and Schwartz 2017, p.48). However, to argue this as Amy Larimer (2016) writes in *Articulate Bodies*, within somatic work, bodies are seen as 'inherently valuable, knowledgeable and unique' (p. 26) and also something that can be considered as an education which values 'dialogue, respect for individual histories, and a sense of balance between body, mind and spirit' (Batson 2007, p.55) providing an experience which is essential for learning. However, until this point the continuation of authoritarian teaching practices taking place within dance technique and dance classes considered somatics and its perception in the world of dance as 'dance as art' or 'dance as education' (Dragon 2015, p.25) and therefore considered as secondary to dance technique. However, the shift was able to come about through identifying that somatic epistemology and embodied learning had the potential to inform a pedagogical framework for the study of movement and dance (Dyer 2009, p. 24). This framework encouraged participants as Dyer (2009) suggests, to fully engage in the embodied processes of 'transforming knowledge and developing more meaningful and integrated ways of being' (p. 26). Somatic practise therefore, has the potential to develop creativity and sensitivity.

Creativity as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is having 'The faculty of being creative; ability or power to create' (OED [Online]). However, the meaning of create provides a number of definitions, although most relevant to dance and the performing arts these definitions include 'Of divine being or agency' and 'To bring into being, cause to exist; esp. to produce where nothing was before (OED [Online]). However, Craft along with the dance educator Jacqueline Smith - Autard (2002) also tell us, creativity (c), involves imagining, supposing or entertaining a hypothesis or hypothesizing (Craft 2002, 81). Whilst being imaginative, the ability to "imagine the world differently in significant ways" (Kenny 1989 cited in craft 2002, 80) can also constitute an element of creativity, and additionally be considered as the main driver of innovation. Alex Laffer (2016) would further this and considers creativity as a means of communication. In the article *How Macmillan created ballets of unrivalled psychological depth* he writes that Macmillan used emotion, behaviour and narrative in his creative process, which he expressed through the dancers' body, portraying inner feelings through emotive choreography ([Online]). As Laffer (2016) further suggests, it is often repeated, although somewhat misleadingly ' that 93% of communication is non-verbal. Every time we move, we reveal something about ourselves' ([Online]), and as Becky Dyer (2009) also highlights:

exploring imaginative conceptions of ourselves as living, embodied, autonomous, yet connected human beings can lead us to more fully discover the creative potentials that lie within each of us

Dyer 2009, p. 38

Therefore, to transform, to create sustainable change, we need to be able to feel and perceive our individual and collective 'old shapes'. We need to increase the awareness of the default shapes that we have embodied and open and deconstruct these shapes. Therefore, by including somatic practice as a means of communication we can discover new ways of embodying new ways of being and action.

As Martha Eddy (2009) suggests, dance excites people to explore movement expression, deepen creative skills and investigate the body kinaesthetically (p.16). Bearing this in mind, it could now be argued that there is a growing interest in dance and somatic practice in higher education. These dance courses focus on the various dance techniques that are selected and its implementation within the corporation of somatic pedagogy, in particular the growing interest and value of for instance, the Feldenkrais Method®. However, it could also be suggested that this is nothing new to dance pedagogy, as dance has used the corrective practice of touching, feeling and connecting as a 'Communitive Method' for correcting students for decades; helping to allow the students to feel the correct placement and connection with their bodies. This guidance becomes a partnership between the student and teacher in order to explore the student's body perception, image, technique and as a means of communication through movement, helping to clarify a correction by assisting the dancer to find a correct muscle, or alignment of the body (Ashley & Wagemaker 2005, p. 9). As Michel Foucault (1926 - 1984) would also argue, the body is an object of control and manipulation, which by instilling bodily discipline and being guided through the practice of 'touch as a means of communication', dance students can be taught, and are able to control their space, behaviours and their body perception, body Image (Markula cited in Bresler, 2004 p. 62) and develop creativity.

Case Study

These thoughts were considered whilst undertaking a small scale case study. This case study provided an insight into the benefit of integrating the Feldenkrais method® into the dance class of a sixth form performing arts dance course. The class comprised of eight female and three male dancers aged 16/17 and at different levels of technical and dance movement ability. The objectives, outcomes and the development of the class can be seen in fig:1

Fig1: Lesson Plan

No of pupils: 11	Girls: 8	Boys: 3
Learning objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To understand how the Feldenkrais method can help to locate and gain a connection to the body. • Be able to apply the technique to the exercises and choreographic tasks. Outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved understanding of movement and connection to the body when performing choreography. • Value the importance that body awareness can contribute to and improve dance technique • Improved quality of choreographic work. 		

Activities

Starter:

Explain the scheme of work

Short background to somatic practice and Feldenkrais Technique

Development:

Practical exercises

1. Remain sitting on chair – guided through verbal explanation – finding centre then giving time to think about where parts of the body were i.e. shoulders, waist, ribs, hips etc.
2. Small rocking motion – fwd, centre, and then backwards – thinking about what muscles and parts of the body have to work in order to do this.
3. Progress to arm movements – extending and also thinking about the body and the use of breath.
4. Getting up off the chair which muscles do you engage to do this? Repeat in reverse.
5. From stood, bending down, thoughts about engagement of the body, alignment of the spine and connection with the body - including 'touch' were necessary.
6. Short warm up – plies, tendus, transfer of weight, jumps – applying the Feldenkrais technique including 'touch' were necessary.
7. Work on choreographic pieces.

The class started with the students being given the learning objectives of the lesson. In this lesson two objectives were set -

- To understand how the Feldenkrais method can help to locate and gain a connection to the body.
- Be able to apply the technique to the exercises and choreographic tasks.

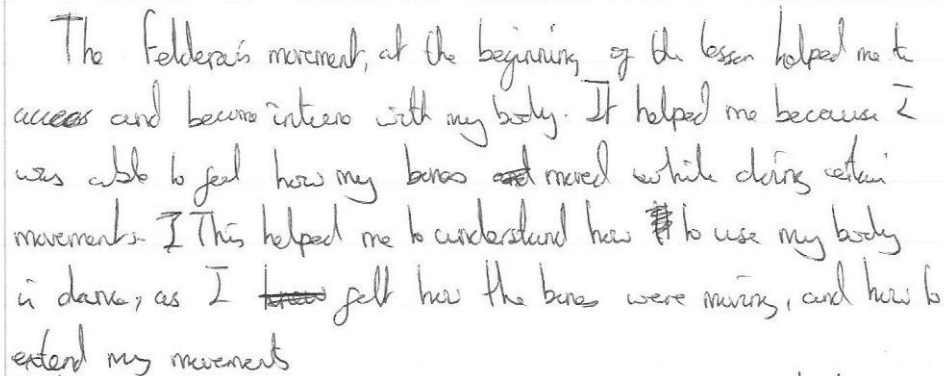
The learning objectives were followed by the lesson outcomes, were it was expected that the students would achieve -

- Improved understanding of movement and connection to the body when performing choreography.
- Value the importance that body awareness can contribute to and improve dance technique
- Improved quality of choreographic work.

This then led to the main body of the lesson. Throughout the duration of the one hour class, the exercises were explained to the students, and they were also guided, were deemed necessary and supportive, by the use of touch, in order to gain the best experience from the Feldenkrais Method® being introduced. The initial section of the class asked the students to feel a connection with their body through the Feldenkrais Method 'Awareness Through Movement®' identified on the lesson plan practical exercises, points 1 -5. Students were asked to consider the position of their body in space, the use of muscles and breath control in order to bring focus to the class and engage the brain.

Students were asked to reflect upon their learning after the class had taken place. The response from the students included 'understand how to use my body' and 'access and become intone with my body'. The poignant words and phrases have been highlighted to emphasise how the student felt. Additional interpretation can be

found within the text however, the case study would need to be revisited to provide further understanding.

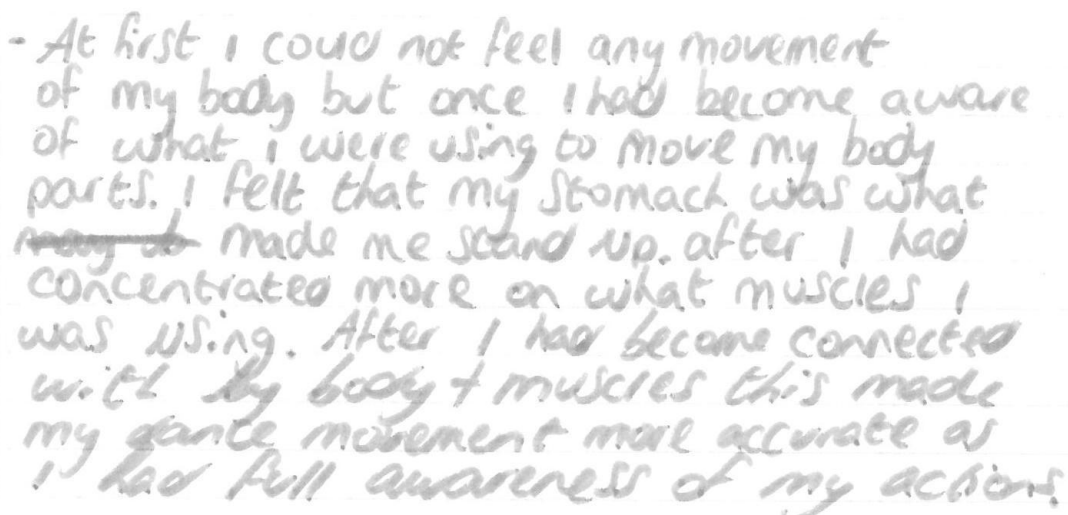


The Feldenkrais movement, at the beginning of the lesson helped me to access and become intone with my body. It helped me because I was able to feel how my bones ~~and~~ moved while doing certain movements. This helped me to understand how ~~to~~ to use my body in dance, as I ~~had~~ felt how the bones were moving, and how to extend my movements

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The class then moved on to technical dance technique, where the Feldenkrais Method 'Functional Integration®' was incorporated to further improve the body's function. This section of the class, point 6 on the lesson plan (fig.1) followed the structure of a ballet class. As the teacher of the lesson, I set the exercise which the students then performed. For example, the alignment of the leg in a tendu devant and derriere. During this time I observed the students movement and through 'touch' placed the students into the correct alignment or position. This allowed the students to feel the correct placement which may not have been achieved without this intervention. The exercise was then repeated. During this class all students embraced the method, and all allowed the use of 'touch as communication' to support their learning and technical development.

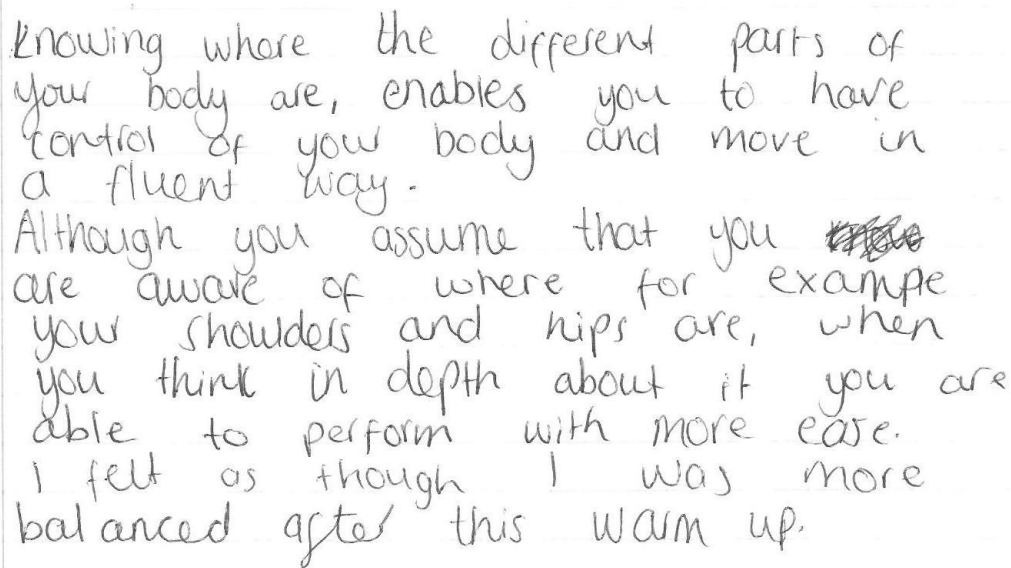
The response from students was positive and when reflecting comments included -



- At first I could not feel any movement of my body but once I had become aware of what I were using to move my body parts. I felt that my stomach was what ~~made~~ made me stand up. after I had concentrated more on what muscles I was using. After I had become connected with my body + muscles this made my dance movement more accurate as I had full awareness of my actions.

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Knowing where the different parts of your body are, enables you to have control of your body and move in a fluent way.
Although you assume that you ~~are~~ are aware of where for example your shoulders and hips are, when you think in depth about it you are able to perform with more ease.
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Again, In addition to these examples, word and phrases which included, 'extended' 'control' and 'helped to find what muscles to use' were also expressed by the students.

Therefore in conclusion, the guidance given through the use of 'touch as a means of communication' allowed the students to reconsider the verbal information given to them, and the opportunity to apply the 'touch' sensations. I observed a greater body extension, losing the closed body language that these students can show when they are with their peers in a school setting, so that the students become freer in their movements, and demonstrating better technique. However, everyone will respond differently and teachers need to monitor carefully how their words and use of 'touch' can affect perceptions in the dance class. Therefore, not to abuse the use of 'touch as communication' which has been a valuable pedagogical tool in the dance class for many years to provide understanding of technical or artistic skill (Kelly 2017, p.53) and in this research to hopefully encourage students to become independent and engaged learners.

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