

Faculty Collaboration in Somatics and Dance Technique

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Many universities are now applying somatic practices to dance technique classes. Yet there is little research addressing the pedagogy of somatic theory and practice within a curricular context. Additionally, somatic theory is often taught in separate lecture courses and there is not much discussion about how to weave somatic theory and practice through interdisciplinary or intradisciplinary approaches. A collaborative pedagogical approach to somatics may be accomplished through the joint efforts of faculty who teach different types of classes such as lecture and technique courses.

This lecture-demonstration addresses pedagogical strategies for joining somatic theory and practice. We begin with an introduction of our separate scholarly areas of performance and choreography, and research in somatics. We then address the discussions that led to an exploratory series of classes combining a technique class and a body lecture course; demonstrate strategies developed from our work together and examples of working through various somatic and anatomical concepts; and discuss curricular and research possibilities as well as issues and problems raised during this project. The lecture-demonstration attempts to bring together an array of curricular teaching subjects including pedagogy, choreography, research, and scholarship through a focus on somatic theory and practice.

Keywords: somatics | dance | pedagogy of somatic theory | somatic practice

Article:

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Jill Green and B.J. Sullivan

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Many universities are now applying somatic practices to dance technique classes. Yet there is little research addressing the pedagogy of somatic theory and practice within a curricular context. Additionally, somatic theory is often taught in separate lecture courses and there is not much discussion about how to weave somatic theory and practice through interdisciplinary or intradisciplinary approaches. A collaborative pedagogical approach to somatics may be accomplished through the joint efforts of faculty who teach different types of classes such as lecture and technique courses.

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Introduction

This paper describes and analyzes a faculty collaboration project in the United States. The goal was to bring together contemporary release technique and somatic theory. The program was developed by two faculty members from different backgrounds and areas of study.

Jill Green is a scholar in the Department of Dance at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her work includes Critical and Postpositivist methodologies and analysis, pedagogy on the body, somatic theory and practice and body image. She developed the concept “social somatic theory,” moving beyond an individualist

definition of somatics and including the body as a social construction. Dr. Green teaches body theory and practice courses and pedagogy.

B.J. Sullivan is an artist/choreographer in the department. She teaches contemporary dance, ballet, repertory, and choreography. Her primary area of research, choreography, is based first in the ongoing development, articulation, application, and teaching of *Safety Release Technique*. She is among a handful of studio teachers worldwide who have developed a comprehensive movement/performance training technique and make the effort to present in scholarly forums both the principles of the technique and its application to choreographic practice.

Ms. Sullivan has developed her work over a number of years. *Safety Release Technique* is not a personalized or idiosyncratic style of movement, or a way of facilitating the mastery of other styles, but rather a comprehensive performance training practice that prepares dancers for full-bodied and vivid expressiveness within any movement language. It is both grounded in and continues to evolve with her ongoing examination of the energies, meanings, and aesthetic applications of movement. *Safety Release Technique* thus enables movement in and out of the floor dynamically and safely, while informing a movement sensibility that ranges from extremely slow to extremely quick. While myriad influences affect the work, they congeal around the premise of moving with support, safety, and awareness.

Discussions Leading to an Exploration of Classes

As faculty members with crossover interests and experiences, we have had discussions about somatics for a number of years. We found ourselves concerned that

students need more body courses and more of an integration of somatics with technique classes. While our department offers twelve technique classes a day in a variety of forms such as contemporary, ballet, African, Jazz, Ballroom, tap, etc., there is only one undergraduate body course and one graduate body course with an additional somatics course which is taken as a technique for one credit. Further, as a somatic practitioner, Green has had a number of students come to her as well as our athletic trainer with injuries and alignment issues. We keep students very busy dancing but do not go deeply into the how and healthy way to dance (outside of the body courses).

Thus, we have been thinking about ways we can create an integration of body knowledge through a body lab. This lab would include both technique and body theory and practice. Interestingly, a few semesters ago, we found that we had classes scheduled together. Sullivan had a release technique class and Green was teaching the somatic course. She was teaching Kinetic Awareness[®] and looking at general principles associated with somatic practices. So we tried an experiment. Green brought her students into Sullivan's class four times (four classes) to look at the conceptual underpinnings of major principles involved in her Safety Release Technique. Of course this was a greater benefit to Sullivan's students since she was directly applying these principles in her classes. Green's students had not been practicing the technique so it all may have been a bit foreign to them. Ideally, we wanted to work with one group who was studying Sullivan's technique and have much more time to explore the concepts of the technique on a somatic basis. This would include extensive experiential exploration as well as discussion. But we began the conversation by starting with this less than ideal situation.

We began by discussing key somatic principles and concepts that Sullivan wanted her students to learn on a more in-depth level. We came up with a list:

- A. Heel-Sitz Bone Connection
- B. Freeing the Hip and Psoas
- C. Knee Alignment and Moving from the Knee
- D. Feeling the Floor with the Foot

We then worked on articulation of each principle so that we were able to communicate these ideas experientially. Generally, we provided some discussion, exploration, and combination/phrase for each concept.

One key idea stressed throughout this project was that these concepts are not universal and not meant to be applied to all dance forms. This list of concepts is delimited to Safety Release Technique. We do not wish to imply that these concepts extend to all dance forms.

Heel-Sitz Bone Connection

We began the first class with a discussion of the heel-sitz bone connection. Green referred to the connection from a martial arts point of view. She articulated the value of seeing this connection as a sense of power and strength as when used to kick in a number of martial arts.

She demonstrated, in a sitting position, how a dancer might stretch the heel away from the sitz-bone to stretch the leg from a bended position, rather than force the knee into the ground, discussing how this allows a flow from sitz-bone to heel rather than a

disconnection of the energy through the leg. Sullivan then discussed the concept from the Bartineieff perspective as an appropriate connection for efficient movement.

Next, we took out the skeleton and discussed alignment. We first addressed the issue of alignment as static and as a correct measurement. We addressed the pain and injury that may be caused by imposing a rigid concept of alignment on a student body. We explained that different techniques and dance forms have different constructions of alignment. We presented alignment as a fluid concept and one that reflects how one lives in one's body (Green 2008, 2005, 2004, /2002-03, 2001,1999; Kleinman 1982).

Then we asked students to explore the sense of the sitz bones, asking them to rock and walk on the sitz bones, and we explored moving form the sitz bones. Green took out balls and had students do some Kinetic Awareness[®] rolling on the balls to feel the sitz bones. Sullivan ended the class with a movement combination form her work based on the heel-sitz bone connection.

Freeing the Hip and Psoas

Since Sullivan felt that her students have a difficult time freeing their hips, we began the second class with a discussion about the hip and psoas. We asked, Where is your hip? Where is the psoas? What does it do? How do you find a deepening of the hip? How can you use the crease in your hip?

We then took out the skeleton to answer these questions and see how the hip and psoas works from a visual perspective. Following the discussion, the students were asked to participate in sensory work and movement exploration, feeling the space in the hip socket, finding the length of the leg from the hip, exploring the range of the hip socket,

experience flexion from the psoas, and lastly, connecting the sense of the hip and psoas to the heel and sitz bone, thus weaving the concepts together as a whole.

After sensing and exploring movement we asked the students to take partners and demonstrated how they can help each other gently lengthen and wiggle the leg to reduce any extra stress or tension in the area.

Lastly, students returned to the sitz bone walk connecting to the hip and heel. The goal was to make connections through the body.

Knee Alignment and Moving from the Knee

We began this class with the skeleton and a discussion about tendencies and problems with hips and how they can affect the knees. Specifically, we addressed how tightness in the hip can cause excess tension and strain the knees. Next, we began to sense and explore movement of hips on the floor, with an awareness to the affects of the movements on the knees and which switched back and forth between from moving from the hips and moving from the knees to further become aware of connections.

A large part of this class was devoted to a discussion about knee alignment, again stressing the cultural context of alignment and the diverse causes of discomfort, pain, and injury within this dance form. We looked at the different places where pronation may begin (i.e. from feet knees, hips, quads) and talked about how gender issues, such as the requirement of young women in the U.S. to not open the legs and the requirement of young men to NOT move the pelvis create bodies that are prone to knee and hip injury.

Next, we explored the relationship between the back of the knee to the heel-sitz

bone connection, and took the exploration into dance movement and lunging.

Feeling the Floor with the Foot

Essentially, we wrapped up key principles in this class and started a discussion, going back over everything and how it all relates to the foot. The key principle in this class was to use the foot as a broad base for support. We emphasized the need to open the foot for support to the floor and release frozen tension in the whole area. We explored foot massage and manipulation so that students could find a broader base of support and addressed pointing as a stretch of the foot rather than a crunching of the toes. Lastly, we asked students to roll their feet on tiny balls, and after, explore movement of the feet with and against the floor, again leading to dance movement.

Conclusions and Reflections

After teaching the four class series we began to assess the project and reflect on what was valuable and what did not work. We quickly agreed that four classes are not enough. There is a need for a whole course on this work. Any benefits from working this way will not be transferred to dancing with this limited exposure to the work.

Secondly, we agreed that it is not ideal to teach two groups of students at the same time. We need to work with one class who is studying release technique with Sullivan.

A key concept of integration emerged from our discussions. We believe in moving away from separate technique and body classes and would like to explore dance training as an interwoven effort. Additionally, the cooperative work of faculty in two different areas provides integration of another kind. Rather than separating scholar from artist, and

practice from theory, this type of work may provide students with a more connective way of viewing dance. Further, by including socio-cultural frameworks for the work, students can weave together micro and macro aspects of learning dance.

Lastly, we realized that there is a need for conceptual and somatic frameworks for technique. It may be significant to point out that somatic work is not a panacea and does not ensure that students will not get hurt or abused during the teaching process. However, an attempt to involve students in the learning process may create more thinking, aware, and knowledgeable dancers.

Curricular and Research Possibilities

While discussing future plans, we decided we would like to design a whole course. Of course, with budgets where they are now, this may not be an ideal time to propose another course, taught by two faculty members. But we want to continue this venture and will try to continue to work together.

Secondly, this pilot project did not include research methodology. We would like to collect data during future projects, including student experience with the work. This time we emphasized the teaching strategies but we would like to know more about how students experienced the work. Some ideas for data collection include journals, interviews, videotaping, etc.

Finally, we would like to find funding to develop the project. Perhaps we can find support to cover the costs of such a program and help analyze the data.

Mostly, we hope to encourage other faculty to work together to find ways to teach

dance differently. Many higher education teachers are probably way ahead of us in this regard. Our project was simple and minimal. We are aware that other dance educators have envisioned their curriculums on deeper levels. We hope that there is a future forum to discuss and share such innovative practices.

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B.J. Sullivan , M.F.A. choreographs, performs and teaches studio courses at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her career includes formal training at The Boston Ballet School and The Juilliard School (BFA), performing with Dance Makers in Toronto, Colin Connor, Joe Goode, Gerri Houlihan, Ralph Lemon, Renee Wadleigh, and Bill Young, and receiving her (MFA) while teaching and choreographing in the dance program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.