

## Somatic knowledge: The body as content and methodology in dance education.

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### **Abstract:**

Before addressing somatic knowledge as content and methodology in dance education, it is useful to take a moment to talk about what is meant by somatic knowledge and somatics as a field of study. The term, “somatics” has been used widely in dance departments throughout this country and the world. However, the term is not a monolith; not everyone uses it in the same way.

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### **Article:**

Before addressing somatic knowledge as content and methodology in dance education, it is useful to take a moment to talk about what is meant by somatic knowledge and somatics as a field of study. The term, “somatics” has been used widely in dance departments throughout this country and the world. However, the term is not a monolith; not everyone uses it in the same way.

I like to use the term somatics as Thomas Hanna discussed it, as a field of study that generally views the body from a first-person perception. Hanna, who is credited with terming the phrase somatics, asserts that data from a first-person perception are quite different than data observed from a thirdperson view.<sup>1</sup> He says that somatics is a matter of looking at oneself from the “inside out, where one is aware of feelings, movements and intentions, rather than looking objectively from the outside in.”<sup>2</sup> Although he emphasizes the point that neither the first-person mode or third-person mode of observations are more factual or better, Hanna claims that there is a distinct difference between the two, as represented by soma and body.

According to Hanna, somatics is the study of the soma, not as an objective “body,” but an embodied process of internal awareness and communication. Process is an inherent concept in this field. In this sense, somatics focuses on an inner experiential body, not on a body as an objective entity or mechanical instrument.

Further, some somatic theorists and educators move into a more macro sociopolitical sphere and address how our bodies and somatic experiences are inscribed by the culture in which we live. I call this body of literature “social somatic theory” because it addresses sociopolitical issues related to somatic theory and practice. Again, by no means, a monolith, these various discourses bump up against each other and may not be consistent with some components of Hanna’s somatic theory in general.<sup>3-6</sup> However, one commonality among the literature of social somatic theory is a general shift that moves outward from micro to macro dimensions and from self to society.

The significant point here is that a focus on bodily experience is paramount in this view of somatics. Whether looking at bodily experience from an inner perspective or more globally through a social lens, our constructions of body are influenced by the interaction of our somas with the world. In this sense, bodily knowledge, may be seen as the ways we understand our selves and our environments through the body; it is also the ways we make meaning of the world through our bodily experiences.

The use of somatic knowledge can be a potential minefield for dance education. The importance of somatic knowledge is clearly most apparent for dance as an art form. The body is the vehicle through which dancers express themselves. In order to effectively move the body, a dancer must not only be aware of the body as a kinesiological instrument but as a living and breathing process. Dancers must become sensitive to the inner messages of the body (i.e., how much tension they are feeling) in order to most effectively communicate movement.

These bodily aspects may lead to particular practical implications for dance education. For example, by learning about significant anatomical and kinesiological principles, students may be able to learn about how to further artistic growth. Further, a number of body awareness strategies may help students deepen their understanding of their lived bodily experiences in ways that may help them perform their art.

### Somatic Knowledge as Content

There are many ways the body may be used as content in dance education. First, of course, the study of experiential anatomy and kinesiology is basic. Most university dance programs include the study of anatomy and kinesiology as a requirement for dance majors. However, a somatic approach to body study may be particularly helpful. For example, through an experiential somatic approach to learning about the body, students may begin to understand how the body works in a personal way. I have found the text, *Bodystories: A Guide to Experiential Anatomy*, by Andrea Olsen,<sup>7</sup> particularly useful for university classes because it offers an experiential approach to the study of the body in dance. It offers exploration of anatomical principles through direct experiences and proprioceptive attention to the body.

A direct knowledge of how the body works can also be offered in the K-12 dance curricula. For example, on the elementary school level, while students learn to identify and move specific body

parts, they may be given directions that allow them to explore the range of movements and kinds of positions possible with that body part. They can also begin to learn to focus proprioceptively on particular body parts and bodily processes such as breathing and energy flow through the body. High school students can begin to learn anatomical principles through texts such as *Bodystories* and application of the principles through movement explorations too.

Another way that somatic knowledge may be used as content in dance curricula is through the direct use of somatic practices. Many universities are beginning to supplement dance education and technique training with separate classes in somatic study. Active somatic modalities such as the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement, Kinetic Awareness, and Body-Mind Centering help students release excessive tension in muscles and reeducate the nervous system through student participation and attention to movement initiation. Many of these methods help students become aware of habitual holding patterns and free them so that they may learn how to approach movement in a more relaxed and integrated manner. For example, in one common exercise, “listening to the body,” which is part of Kinetic Awareness, and often appears in a number of other somatic practices, students slowly focus on parts of their bodies in order to recognize habitual tension patterns that block free movement and thought. Through this process they may actualize body-mind connections.

For example, when someone is experiencing a great deal of stress, her shoulders may become tight or her breathing may become labored. By slowly focusing on these processes through proprioceptive sensing, habits are brought into awareness, and may be replaced by more efficient movement patterns.

Classes in somatic practices may also help students integrate physical, physiological, psychological, and cognitive processes. Kinetic Awareness and Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement make use of exploring slow movements with ease in order to help students find more efficient movement patterns; Bartenieff Fundamentals explores movement initiation and intent; Progressive Relaxation explores active tension initiation and release; Body-Mind Centering explores physiological systems and developmental movement patterning; Kinetic Awareness and Somarhythms explore the use of balls to provide feedback about inner sensations and movement.

These systems provide many benefits to dance students. With less frozen habitual tension, students may move freely with greater ease and more mobility and control. It should be pointed out that tension, in and of itself is not necessarily detrimental. Different degrees of tension (or energy) are required to perform various movements. However, it is when tension becomes habitual or frozen, that it is unhealthy.

These somatic practices are a good fit for college and university programs. Many of these systems are included in the offerings of many dance curricula. Some of these courses are counted as technique courses while others are included as special topics. It may be significant to note here that somatic practices such as the Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Awareness

Through Move- ment are now found in a number of arts programs in universities, not just in dance departments but in music and theater departments as well.

Somatic practices can be included in public school dance too. However, I offer a word of warning. When I taught in elementary and high schools, I did not include somatic practices in my classes until I found that the students knew me well and respected me as a teacher and dancer. Further, I provided very small doses of the work on the elementary level through activities such as calming the body after rigorous activity or as a way to experience bodily processes such as breathing and awareness of energy flow. On a high school level, I did not spend too much time on somatic work and included some Kinetic Awareness and yoga practices before and after classes. Young students are not always ready for deep somatic work and age appropriate activities are crucial for their successful use in the classroom.

### Somatic Knowledge as Methodology

Somatic experiences may also be taken directly into dance education classes as a methodological strategy. The breathing approach, or a gentle reminder to not get in the way of the breathing process by holding one's breath, is one example of bringing a somatics approach to dance learning and incorporating somatic activities into the dance class. When there is excessive tension in a body part, or students are generally stressed, a reminder to exhale may allow students to let go of habitual tension and also break habits that interfere with natural breathing. Some university teachers include specific breathing instructions during movements, not unlike the breathing directions practiced during yoga asanas.

Many teachers also successfully use imagery during technique classes. Although the use of imagery often requires the absence of actively initiated movement, it may be helpful to take some time for imagery during class. For example, if dance educators observe a number of problems with hyperextension of the lumbar spine and retracted pelvises, one of Irene Dowd's "ideokinetic" images may be used to make changes in neuromuscular patterning:

Simply imagining the sacrum as being very heavy so that it drops down toward the ground behind the heels allows the pelvis to fall into place underneath us without effort. This also lengthens the spine without destroying the curves that belong in it. It is important to watch the sacrum drop down as if on a plumb line in your mind's eye only. Any active effort on your part will increase your muscles work and defeat the whole purpose of centering the pelvis in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

Sensing can also be brought directly into dance classes. Students in university or high school dance classes may be encouraged to be aware of habitual holding patterns throughout class, as a way of learning about themselves and coping with their psychophysical problems. Also some time may be devoted to sensing the body at the beginning of class, before the actual warm-up. By focusing on parts of their bodies and recognizing habitual tension patterns that block free

movement, students may initially release excessive tension, and ultimately dance more freely and expressively.

Additionally, a somatic approach to dance may be generically implemented in dance education. By a somatic approach, I mean a regard for somatic knowledge and the inner proprioceptive communication system, which may be tapped by dance students. A somatic perspective may effectively enhance dance learning.

There is no doubt that there are some basic differences in the purposes of dance training and somatics. Glenna Batson points out that some of these contrasts include:

1. The difference of focus on movement goals in dance and sensory processing in the body therapies,
2. The differences in the way dance approaches alignment as a desired posture or position in which a specific musculature is attained while the body therapies approach reprogramming of the central nervous system,
3. The difference in the emphasis on stylization or specific musculoskeletal usage in dance and the emphasis on providing “ways of working” (process) in the body therapies, and
4. The use of different modes to develop mental and physiologic flexibility in dance and the body therapies.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly these differences are significant. The intention of employing somatic principles in dance education is not to replace movement skill with relaxation or passive muscle usage. However, there are ways that a somatic perspective can be effectively brought into dance class.

One way of incorporating a somatic perspective is to acknowledge the distinct humanness and wholeness of each student. Although there may be correct ways of performing specific techniques in dance, teachers can create a nonjudgmental and safe environment, conducive to inner exploration, self-learning, and growth.

This also means respecting the student’s inner complexity, and allowing the student to share in the responsibility for her or his own learning. It means listening to the students for signs about how they may best learn the material and honoring each student’s learning process by providing a number of experiences that offer multiple learning styles. Just as somatics focuses on inner process, learning is also a subjective experience and since the body is a human instrument, dance learning becomes a complex psychophysical process.

In this context, mechanistic prescriptions may be limited. For example, there may be a number of reasons why a student has difficulty with a particular skill. For one student, a problem with balance may be caused by a lack of knowledge about the structure of the body. Here, the student may simply misunderstand how body parts may be balanced in order to produce an efficient ease

of movement. In this case, particular information about the body's structure may allow the student to experience a more balanced alignment.

Alignment, however, may mean more to a student than just the arrangement of body parts for functional efficiency. Seymour Kleinman suggests a holistic view of alignment based upon a phenomenological perspective of the body, one that emphasizes the primacy of the world of experience. He explains:

Posture in the lived sense is really a continuous and ongoing stance in the world. This ongoing behavior is undoubtedly the resultant of a complex conglomeration of prior experiences, our inborn inclinations, as a result of our genetic make up, and probably most of all, posture is the manifestation of the choices and decisions we make during the course of the ongoing dialogue which constitutes existence or life.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, alignment is a reflection of who we are, what we experience, and what the world means to us. Therefore, the cause of misalignment may have an emotional basis (i.e., a slump in the shoulders and torso may be caused by depression), may be a problem related to the genetic core (i.e., scoliosis), may be part of an inefficient learning pattern, or may even have a sociocultural source (i.e., a pronation of the feet caused by holding of the inside of the legs in societies, such as ours, where women are encouraged to cross their legs or keep them held together). Correction of alignment solely from the outside will never work sufficiently in these cases because the motivation to hold onto the inefficient pattern may be too strong.

Although a more global education (i.e., psychological, sociological, cultural, and political) may be necessary in order to deal with these potential causes and issues, and, I believe, should be introduced as part of every dance curriculum, dance teachers may effectively use somatic principles by being cognizant of this diversity of experience. If a student is having a problem with alignment, the teacher may look for clues and be willing to explore numerous possibilities and approaches.

For example, if frozen tension in the lumbar spine seems to be the cause of a retracted pelvis, and the student is resistant to change, this may be a sign that there may be an emotional element or the habitual learning of an inefficient movement pattern that has created excessive tension over time. The teacher may bring the problem to awareness by asking the student if she is aware of where her pelvis (and tailbone) is moving in space, and how that feels. Awareness may be the first step toward change. Secondly, rather than manipulating the pelvis for the student, the teacher may suggest that the student breathe and gently and slowly move the spine in all directions for a minute to release the excessive tensions and discover new possibilities and movement patterns. In other words, by seeking diverse causes and possibilities, the dance teacher may help students learn by allowing and encouraging them to take ownership of their own bodies.

On an elementary or middle school level this may mean providing creative movement explorations in which the teacher emphasizes the movement qualities and organic processes that take place in dance. For example, Sue Stinson uses the metaphor of finding the magic in dance to help children explore the inner joy of movement that characterizes dance as an art form. Stinson also uses bodily processes to help children control their own energy by going inward to listen to their pulses in an effort to control their use of energy through a somatic means. Although younger children will not participate in the kind of technique class described above, they can still learn how to discern particular qualities of movement through a focus on self-awareness and proprioception.

### Cultural Sensitivity – A Word of Caution

Somatic knowledge in and of itself is not inherently good or bad. The mistake that can be made, however, is aiming for universality in the rules that govern somatic principles. We should not make the mistake of delving into personal subjective ways of knowing the world without looking at the inner experiences as a sociocultural construction. We need to apply a broader definition of somatic knowledge than a focus on solely inner experience. We need a concerted effort to look ahead, and envision the possibilities of somatics on diverse levels and dimensions. But first, we need to recognize the many approaches to and applications of the body in dance.

Johnson claims that our bodies and bodily experiences are shaped by history and culture. He sees the body as a viewpoint and claims:

My body – its sensibilities, movements styles, reaction patterns, and health – is not simply an individual reality governed by its own biophysical laws and idiosyncratic effects of my personal history. I am also a result of the ideologies within which I move.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, bodily experience is not neutral or value free; it is shaped by our backgrounds, experiences, and sociocultural habits. We are not all given some generalized body and all bodies are not the same. Our bodies are constructed and develop in a particular place at a particular time and habituated by the culture in which we live. Therefore, it is helpful to study the sociocultural effects on the body as well as how our bodies work in practice.

This means that we embrace awareness that everyone's bodily experience is different and that there is no universal construction of the body nor is there an ideal body type, alignment, or correct way to be in our bodies. We are taught how to live in our bodies; therefore our bodies are not the same. For example, in some traditional Eastern cultures children sit on the floor while they eat while in Western societies children sit in chairs. As a result these children may develop different postural habits and it is the responsibility of educators to be aware of these differences when applying somatic principles. The dancing bodies of different students, and students in different cultural settings, have different requirements and needs; they are diverse and grow to be different cultural bodies. Multicultural education in dance then must acknowledge that we are

talking about different kinds of body knowledge when we attempt to teach students to dance. When we acknowledge this, then we will be teaching somatically and multiculturally.

## Conclusion

Somatic knowledge and practice have much to offer dance and arts educators if they are aware of diversity issues and the need to address sociocultural influences on the body. With feelings of loss and isolation, which are perhaps perpetuated by a technological culture that results in a focus on virtual experience and artistic activities that move away from the body, it may be crucial that we bring learning back to the body in somatically significant ways. Here is where the need for a bodily discourse and pedagogy becomes paramount. While educators need to address the seriousness of dance and its sister arts as artistic disciplines, we must also recognize that arts education policy must address the body as a source of knowledge as well as a tool for expressive movement and art making. We must make a constant effort to resist taking “the body” out of arts education, and indeed use it as a major source for dance and arts pedagogy.

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