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Somatic Sensing and Creaturely Knowing in the Improvisation

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ABSTRACT

In this presentation I will introduce an approach to teaching dance improvisation in the university setting that invites students to seek beneath their learnt dance techniques and familiar movement patterns in order to uncover their most fundamental levels of ‘creaturely knowing’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009) and somaesthetic sensing (Shusterman, 2008). I draw on references from somatics (Fraleigh, 2000, 2009), neuro-science (Damasio, 1999), cognitive biology (Varela et al, 2000), bio-chemistry (Mae Wan Ho, 1998) and evolutionary aesthetics (Dissanayake (1995) in order to underpin and re-contextualise dance improvisation – both educational and performance based practice. As an educator, choreographer and performance improviser of some 40 years I have become interested, not so much in what we might teach our students but how we can help them to access movement possibilities that lie dormant in their cellular memories. These ways of moving are individualistic and sensuous. They lie beneath those that have been culturally inscribed or externally learned as codified techniques. Sourcing movement in this way has, I will contend, the potential to heighten and broaden students’ sense of self-identity and to stimulate their creativity and artistry. In the process students come to understand their integral relationship with and as part of nature. In her detailed research study of ‘The Intuitive Experience’ Claire Pettimengen-Peugeot (1999) observed that, ‘at the moment of the intuition, the sensation of being an ‘ego’ distinct from the world vacillates and even dissolves’ (71).

When included as process-oriented research within the classroom learning situation there is also the potential to insert information and theoretical concepts from a variety of disciplinary areas into the sensed/intuited action-scape of the dance. When the language used is carefully considered (East, 2006, 2011) new knowledge may be assimilated into the dancer’s subconscious as part of the organic somato-sensory process. By combining deep somatic investigation with creative exploration the ecology of the classroom becomes enlivened and the student’s investigations deepened, the usual disciplinary boundaries are dissolved and students’ understanding of the subject of ‘dance’ is broadened. This paper will draw on examples from my teaching and research at the University of Otago, Aotearoa, New Zealand.

INTRODUCTION

*“You cannot decide direction you can only live this moment that is available to you. By living it direction arises. If you dance, the next moment is going to be of a deeper dance. Not that you decide, but you simply dance this moment. “(188-189)
Zen Master, Osho (2001)*

Intuition: Knowing beyond Logic.

In her inspiring book ‘Composing While Dancing’ Melinda Buckwalter (2010) surveys the strategies, processes and applications for improvisational dance-making of a number of key artists. In the approach I will outline here, however, I am attempting to help students dig down beneath the intellect to a place so instinctual, so beneath any strategy or rationale that a move may happen as or before one becomes aware of it as an event. During such a moment, within my own improvising, I don’t ask myself why, for instance, am I licking the leg of my co-dancer (this did happen once), grazing across the floor like some primordial starfish or sea urchin, or reaching my arms towards the light as a tendril searching for support (as I will mention again later). I am, as the opening quote suggests, simply living this moment as it becomes available to me – I am dancing the moment – or, as Mary Whitehouse might say, the moment is dancing me. I am simply present – highly attentive to this moment *now*. Cognitive biologist Francisco Varela (2002) calls this act of being in the moment ‘*nowness*’ which he describes as pre semantic in that it does not require memoration (or in Husserl’s terms, ‘presentification’) in order to emerge’ (118). It is a difficult place to bring students to – especially those in their freshman year, and still burdened with either their codified dance training or with no dance training at all- and almost certainly struggling with their identity as young adults. There is not so much a search for choreographic expression as a search for the essence of themselves and an affirmation of their place within this global youth culture which includes knowing the ‘moves’.

Many writers and educators have written about identity and self-discovery through art-making. One of these authors, dance writer Carol Press (2002) comments that “Fundamentally the mission of education is the development of individuals who can meaningfully engage the world with exploration, self-assertion, vitality and reciprocity, for the enhancement and transformation of sense of self, group self and the evolution of significant culture” (175). While this seems a tall task for us educators I believe that it is one where the university improvisation class can play an important role. My aim is to plant the seed of identity through movement a little deeper in the hopes that movement might evolve from a core rootstock of individual somesthetic consciousness (as described by Damasio, Shusterman, and Sheets-Johnstone). In his book, The Feeling of What Happens Antonio Damasio (1999) describes ‘a transient core-self that is shaped and re-shaped by contact with objects in the environment. From the memories of this contact an autobiographical-self constructs itself. Maxine Sheets Johnstone (2009) refers to the most fundamental level of somatic consciousness as ‘creaturely knowing’ which is simply to do with ‘surface recognition sensitivity’ (p. 182). She suggests that corporeal consciousness may have evolved from these tactile sensuous interfaces into conscious movement). Richard Shusterman (2008) borrowing from Merleau-Ponty, advocates practice in “lived somesthetic experience” (63) but also suggests the “fruitful possibility of ...lived somesthetic reflection...of

body consciousness” (63). In his view, by practicing somaesthetic awareness our proprioceptive consciousness and sensory system become better tuned to our performing of life. I am interested in how a process of *biological backtracking* (as I call this intuitive tracing beneath one’s acquired behaviour patterns to a place of pure sensory response) might influence students’ deep sensing of self, how they might dredge their ‘creaturely knowing’.

Prompt: *From this place in the bedrock where you have lain still for millenia begin to unpeel the layers of substrate, to evolve as a new form, a new configuration of energy. [“The active now connecting ‘past’ and ‘future’, real with ideal”](Ho:248)]*

When students truly explore this kind of material they/we leave behind the conventions of modernist choreographic practice and, along with these, the kinds of aesthetic values, evaluation of product and the presumption of theatrical presentation. I am, however, conscious that there is a component of performativity or ‘presentification’ involved in moment to moment intuitive movement exploration that interested viewers may find absorbing or empathically engaging, and therefore, am not excluding the viewer. When the motivation for movement is simply moving itself there can be no end goal, no final outcome and no particular standard to attain. This is a moving investigation that does not attempt to shape students in any particular way. It is a practice that requires no conscious symbolic expression or learned movement patterns. Students simply enter into a spontaneous searching, surfacing and sensing of their environment, each other and themselves. Nevertheless, as I hope to prove, there is important sustainable educational value implicit in this approach.

Prompt: *Like a plant moving towards the light the sensuous soma approaches without judgement or expectation. There is curiosity with innocence.*

As the previous prompt suggests my interest in plants also informs this work. I like their egoless, yet determined reaching into the world – their searching, spiralling movement towards the light. I recall once finding myself face-downward on the floor with one outstretched arm and claw-like spread and arched fingers feeling the floor around me before withdrawing, arching, twisting and spiralling, only to repeat the same move in another direction several more times. A friend who witnessed the performance described one moment when I adopted an insect-like action that hovered and swayed, multi-limbed and fragile. Meanwhile my animal ears were tuned to the musical sounds and vocal utterings of other participants. I was conscious, yet unconcerned by those watching. The post-show feeling was of exhilaration and complete emptiness of mind.

Cognitive biologists, Varela, Thompson and Rosch (2000) define this form of sensuous contact with the environment as ‘a form of rapport between the senses and their objects, a matching of sensitivity between a sense and an object...a dynamic process giving rise to emergence...both a cause and an effect...a coming together where there is potential for awareness” (119). These authors reject the notion of a need for self-consciousness preferring instead the term ‘emergence’. I am reminded, here, of Susan Scorbaty’s (2013) ‘emergent Improvisation’ based on the science of complexity.

Prompt: *How might we explore the idea of emerging presence?*

Studies by Francisco Varela and his colleague Renaud Barbaras (1999) has led to a new awareness of cognition as a whole body activity how sensory experience might be processed as a complex holistic set of responses– something we dancers know intuitively to be true. Mabel Todd knew it also when she wrote ‘The Thinking Body’. Barbaras (1999) refers to “behaviour as an expression of ...totality” ...that can no longer be grasped as an encounter between a living being and an already constituted world, but as an ‘expression.”(532-533) - making and unmaking itself from moment to moment as it makes contact with the world or operates within it.

Prompt: *Organism and environment enfold into each other and unfold from one another in the fundamental circularity that is life itself.* (Varela, Thompson, Rosch, 2000, p.217)

We read from these scientists a different way of discussing time, space, intention, memory (past action), now-time (nowness) and expressivity that may serve to re-contextualise the study of dance within broader academic fields that include the cognitive sciences.

Biochemist Mae Wan Ho (1998, 2003) suggests that as (human) space-time structures we shape and re-shape our-selves and our actions from moment to moment as we choreograph ourselves in and as part of the world. I make a direct link here to students' self-identity as Ho States,

“The positing of ‘self’ as a domain of a coherent space-time structure implies the existence of active agents who are free. Freedom in this context means being true to ‘self’, in other words, being coherent. A free act is thus a coherent act.”(245)

But individual identity can only exist within a community of diverse others, and thus Ho describes, “a nested hierarchy of individuals and communities...truly a participatory creative universe” (248) which aligns with the classroom community of improvising dancers.

Prompt: *As diverse species in an old forest allow yourself to exist in accordance with your truest nature, yet amongst others.*

Ho describes the ceaseless emerging, submerging and re-emerging from the energy substrate of new patterns in the universe. I might encourage the same continuous energy flow and transforming by the students.

Prompt: *Allow a ceaseless emerging, submerging and re-emerging from the energy substrate of new patterns in the universe .*

To allow students to move beyond self-consciousness and into “a truly timeless-spaceless state which is beyond our comprehension” (p. 242) is, according to Ho, to allow a glimpse of states of pure aesthetic inspiration- akin to what some may call a religious experience or altered state. As an organism interacts with the environment changes occur on a deep level of sensory perception.

Leading students to experience this ‘performing’ of their fundamental selves offers them, I suggest, crucial insight into themselves. They may not quite achieve a zen state of ‘no mind’ but they can certainly experience a lack of self-consciousness and a shedding of old habits and learned movements. As Lavender (2012) would say, they are dancing their ‘present-ness’ as opposed to their ‘past-ness’ (p.63). While I am not suggesting that this coming to terms with self might be all that happens in the choreography class, it does, nevertheless offer another form of validation and adds another dimension to dance within the university. For Fraleigh (2000) sensory experience informs our understanding both of ourselves as conscious organisms and of the expressive energies of dance. She states, “At an experiential level, somatic movement explorations and dance are related.”(60).

Prompt: Searching – *through air, reaching, spiralling, opening/closing rolling, slithering, upwards,, along, around, between.* Surfacing – *walls, floor, another body, own body.* Sensing – *smell, taste, texture, temperature, listening, seeing.* Musicians – *Is there a sound-scape beneath or outside of learned, regular tonal range and rhythmic structure that might be a response to these images?*

EDUCATIONAL VALUE

So what do I see as the value(s) in inviting students to explore movement improvisation guided by their somato-sensory intuitions rather than learn someone else's external expectation of “the

danced-choreographic” (Lavender , 2012, p.63). Perhaps I am simply tired of seeing whole classes using the same lifts holds, turns, steps within what they consider to be different dances but which in fact look like the same one. The following are some further key values as I perceive them:

1. Promotes less self-consciousness amongst the students and a deeper concentration on the unperformed/enacted moment. It is not that the students are not aware they are being witnessed, but that their directed energy is more deeply in the action and time, space, and memory are interacting intuitively and unhesitatingly.
2. Value as transformative educational practice. Davis Hutchinson and Sandra Bosaki (2000) include intuitive practices as a valid aspect of holistic, experiential and transformative education. While describing intuition as “a cognitive process unmediated by rational analysis...” (179) , they suggest that there might be a form of reflection that is “a state of being unto itself, a vehicle for encountering the richness and depth of the universe”(181). I suggest here that this practice can itself bring about new or transformative understanding for students. Action and reflection, memory and immediate perception meld into one in the moment of being/doing. This, I contend , is the new leading edge of experiential education – in simply acknowledging the value of conscious presence and absolute awareness in the unobstructed (by thinking) moment of doing.
3. Other defining values of this kind of holistic and transformative education emphasise “personal integration, as well as socio-cultural and ecological awareness” (Bosaki,182).
4. This value connects with an empathic concern of care and belonging (Gablik,1991; Foster 2011) a sense of community, relationship or oneness with the world and its peoples – nature and culture combined. In other words this kind of learning activity nurtures a sense of ecological identity that sees self as part of/ not separate from others and the environment. Nature and culture become experienced as one inter-related process.
5. In its valuing of first-person intuition and tacit understanding my approach belongs within a somatic approach to teaching and learning. It is self-directed, self-activated, self-determining.
6. There is value for the university research community as the dance improvisation class becomes a collaborator in trans-disciplinary research into cognitive thinking, intuition, perception ,creativity, and more.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT AND ACADEMIC RIGOR

In this somato-sensory improvisational teaching and learning approach there is no technique required, no wrong or right way to proceed and no expected outcome. Assessment is largely through auto-ethnographic research essays and reflexive journal writing. Students define their progress in creaturely knowing in their own terms as they reflect on their sensory experiences and encounters; their intuitions of self-coherence; connection or disconnection to others and the environment; and their sustained immersion in what Lavender (2013, in conversation) refers to as ‘the interests of the body’. Following the practice students take time to share thoughts and revelations and to either draw or write their reflections. They are encouraged to make connections with the literature of somaesthetics, eco-perception psychology, biological and cognitive sciences along with recent writing by other innovators of the improvisation class. Like

educationalist Patricia Broadfoot (2000) I believe that “some of the most powerful ingredients of effective learning, that may be non-assessable by standard means, are excluded from curriculum as a result. [And that,] We pay a high educational price for our obsession with measurement.” (p. 200).

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

If we consider self-awareness, and creative self-reliance, problem solving and intuition as essential attributes of surviving in an everchanging and unpredictable transdisciplinary world then we can make a strong case for the kinds of sensory intuitive practices that I am promoting here. Broadfoot suggests that there has been “a relative lack of scholarly attention” (p. 202) to intuition in university research. Some of us who do have this interest may be to blame for working to make our creative pedagogies fit into an out-moded model of nineteenth century assessment requirements. But can we simply side-step academic assessment because it no longer suits our subject matter? I don’t think so yet.

IN CONCLUSION

A program of creaturely knowing, somatic sensing and biological back-tracking, as I have called it, can help students discover deeper aspects of their individual selves, and understand shared qualities and capacities of humanness. For in the end it is the discovery and affirmation of ourselves as vibrant empathic, participatory and connected human beings that may be the most important facet of all learning. By re-orienting the course goals and learning outcomes the improvisation class has the capacity to make a strong contribution here. The resulting “naturally aesthetic behaviour” (Dissanayake, 1992, 1995: p. 71) or “immersion in the interests of the body” (Lavender, 2013, personal conversation), or what I have termed Intuitive movement practice (IMP) (East, 1999) and, more recently, Creaturely knowing can be validated as an important part of the dance spectrum within the university.

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BIOGRAPHY

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