

Skinner Releasing Technique: dancing from within

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Abstract

This article begins by introducing some thoughts on the current place of somatic approaches to learning dance in higher education. Specific references are then made to the pedagogy of Skinner Releasing Technique and the ways in which this practice cultivates body awareness, creative play and personal artistry. The article concludes with suggestions as to why we should be making space for somatic approaches in dance education.

Keywords

somatic
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Somatic practice in the field of dance education is increasingly receiving the recognition and status it deserves. In the United Kingdom a small but powerful community of dance educators are now working towards integrating somatic practices into their undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. One key reason for the recent popularity of somatic practice is the changing and evolving attitudes towards the dancer in training, which has led to many dance educators believing it is time to shift away from a didactic method of delivery. A move towards methods that facilitate the exploration of one's own body and its possibilities is now considered pedagogically more favourable and beneficial. As a result we are now seeking out established and emerging body-mind theories and we are contributing to somatic discourse. There is a significant increase in the number of individuals who are focusing on solely practising and sharing somatic approaches, whilst others have pursued certification in one or more methods such as Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method and Skinner Releasing Technique.

In the twenty-first century a definition of 'somatic' is somewhat difficult because according to Green (2002: 114) 'the term is not a monolith', meaning that many practitioners, therapists, artists and educators do not use it in the same way. Despite its multi-interpretations, it is Hanna who first used the term 'somatic' in 1976 to name the approaches to body-mind integration. Central to understanding the term is, as Hanna explained, that information perceived from a subjective experience is different to that from data experienced from a third-person perspective. Hanna describes subjective experience as a way of looking at oneself from the inside out where one becomes aware of feelings, sensations and intentions rather than looking objectively from the outside in. Fortin (2002: 128) offers a succinct generic description of somatic as being an 'umbrella term used to assemble experiential bodily practices that privilege subjective experience'.

Dance educators who favour a somatic approach use a number of methods that allow for time to attend to the body in a quiet, non-rushed and gentle way so as to encourage the individual to engage in a process of learning intuitively, cognitively and with whole body consciousness. With this in mind, somatic education can be understood to be a process that supports students with deepening an understanding of their body and progressively leads them towards taking responsibility for their own learning, choices and progress inside and outside of the studio.

This method of working from the inside out is often new to students who have embarked on a vocational or degree course in dance. It is widely accepted in the field of dance education that traditional methods of facilitating dance – especially dance technique, which for obvious semantic reasons is now more commonly referred to as studio practice – focus on the acquisition of skills with the teacher leading and demonstrating. This leads the student to become a representational body relying on extrinsic motivation and guidance, which is often sought from the facilitator and which is further emphasized from looking at their reflection in a studio mirror. Every September I experience this behaviour when Level 4 (Year 1) dance students participate in their first somatic class with me. We explore a simple activity of walking and pausing whilst sensing our feet and knees softening. I say, 'Let's all pause, and for a moment begin to sense your knees and feet softening'; without fail most of the group will turn to look directly at me, even if their back is to me they will turn around to be able to see and look at me. And they continue to look until I ask 'Hmm, can you take a few moments to reflect on why you feel you have to look at me whilst sensing your knees and feet?' Moments of silence follow, usually with many students fidgeting in an uncomfortable manner whilst still gazing at me. Then I ask in a gentle way, 'Have I got *your* knees and feet?' We pause momentarily in silence to allow time for reflection. I continue with saying, 'I can't soften them for you!' I then say, 'Maybe you can play with closing your eyes and explore feeling your knees and feet beginning to soften ... allowing yourself, with your eyes closed, to play with an image of softening.' We then continue to develop this activity for a short while, pausing at intervals to chat and reflect upon experiences. And from then on, for some, the journey towards self-directed learning and embracing somatic practice and embodying somatic wisdom begins.

Although this is a simple example its underlying messages are quite disconcerting. The students' behaviour betrays that they feel they can only do what they have previously experienced, which is that they have learned to perceive in relation to teachers showing and/or telling them what to do and how to do it; as a consequence most do not understand that bodily knowledge begins from within. Students therefore require help with cultivating awareness of perception and with becoming attuned to inner sensations and how these can aid with their learning and improvement unique to them. Perception needs to be nurtured, as does experiential learning. Sadly, my example also illustrates that a number of students are disembodied; they have no ownership of their own body and lack knowledge of how to explore finding solutions to postural and/or movement problems in a creative manner. I also witness a few students who in their first year of study arrive in the studio with an innate acuity

and physical facility to build on what they already have; however, the majority appear with habitual patterns that have led to poor posture and technique and they are inhibited, physically tight and tense. It is these students, according to Smith who ‘... need to work on where they *are* before attempting to learn techniques’ (Smith’s emphasis) (in Girard 2007: 22). What Smith is suggesting is that building on corporeal misuse will hinder possibilities and limit progress. Of course, the majority of dance students do have the potential to become aware of and to improve their own physical make-up and movement range; however, as educators we have to ensure that we can offer a variety of methods and dance practices to help and guide the student towards recognizing and cultivating their potential. Providing a range of approaches also ensures that an assortment of learning styles is considered and that the student is supported with their journey to becoming a versatile artist.

Those who work in the field of somatic education trust that this is an approach that can aid a student with experiencing a personal insight into their body. With a growing somatic knowledge students can begin to understand and acknowledge their dysfunctional postures and habitual thought and movement patterns, so over time the learning process is understood to be one of re-education and of re-programming. For example, in dance an awareness of learned responses and habitual patterns such as holding on to tension in the shoulders or back, locking the knees and/or rolling them inward can gradually begin to be adjusted. It is the ongoing practice of listening to and regulating sensations and incidences that allow this metamorphosis to occur. Body listening and regulating are therefore a key focus of the practice. Although I seem to be emphasizing bodily knowledge and improvement of bodily skills, by no means do I believe that this is the sole purpose of a somatic dance class; however, it is an essential facet in the context of studio practice.

I regard movement to be of central importance in understanding and connecting with all aspects of the self.

A somatic practice that allows for an exploration and recognition of many dimensions of the self is Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT). To date there is very little written about SRT and yet it is gaining international recognition, particularly in the United Kingdom. It was born in the 1960s and developed by its founder Joan Skinner who is based in Seattle, in the United States of America. Skinner differentiates release work (which is understood to be an aesthetic that is relaxed or fluid) from that of releasing. She defines the latter as being concerned with ‘releasing hidden tension and blocked energy which in turn releases power and strength, thus enabling the dancer to move with maximum ease, efficiency and economy’ (Moran 2006). Similar to traditional codified dance techniques, SRT focuses on improving posture, alignment, flexibility, strength, stamina and dynamic range; however, they are explored within creative processes that take their form as spontaneous movement, so the technical and the creative are fused to become one. In SRT workshops, checks lists, image actions (often beginning on the floor), totalities (lying on the floor) and movement studies (often travelling) aid to ease or release holding patterns and blocked energy and promote an integrated alignment of the whole self. Partner graphics (tactile activities) give the imagery an immediate kinaesthetic effect.

As with all somatic practices, first-person experience is central to the learning environment and so the process of allowing the individual to be more open and available to choice and self-directed learning begins to be established. Individuals are given guided imagery and a choice to move or not move within the given image. Prior to an image being given, a check list – a system that progressively encourages, cultivates and refines perceptive skills – prepares the individual to be more open and receptive to an activity that follows it. Skinner (in Skura 1990: 12) likens this formative process to ‘autogenic training’ as it helps the dancer to let go of anxieties and holding patterns of tension and can aid with experiencing an inner calm.

As with many other dance practices, the use of guided imagery and metaphor is core to the work of SRT. For example in class two, students are presented with imagining their ‘breath transforming into a white mist’. It is then suggested that perhaps ‘we can allow our mind to soften so that we can blend with the image. Perhaps we can see in our mind’s eye and feel kinaesthetically the breath as white mist travelling along our bones ... perhaps travelling along the spine, curling around each vertebra ... trailing over the ribs ... spiralling out through our limbs, and as we blend with the image of white mist perhaps it can move us a little or not.’ What lies beneath this image is the suggestion that the breath can move the dancer as they lengthen, spiral and expand. In class six, a playful image of the ‘bones loosening and dangling’ is presented. The dancer is invited to imagine that their ‘long, curving ribs, each rib, can loosen a little and dangle. All the vertebrae of the spine, each one, loosening and dangling ... the long bones of the limbs can perhaps loosen a little and dangle like wind chimes.’ This then becomes a dance of the loose bones. These images aid the dancer with not thinking about how to move because they are involved in the practice of aligning themselves with the image. It is the moment between imagining and becoming aware of the breath as white mist or bones as loosening and dangling that the process of letting go or releasing occurs and a somatic learning experience happens.

I have presented these examples because they illustrate how the use of metaphor is used as a way of nurturing kinaesthetic experiences as well as helping the student to engage with key technical principles that underpin the work. An awareness of and efficient use of breath is crucial for stamina, endurance and ease of movement. Playing with an image of loose bones helps with moving skeletally and invites a quality of lightness and freedom of movement, whilst spatially (both internally and externally) opening, lengthening and expanding. Scruton discusses metaphoric process as ‘bringing dissimilar things together, in creating a relation where previously there is none’ (in Swanwick 2007: 497). It is this fusion that brings about new experiences and outcomes. I would argue that on many levels this is certainly true of SRT. For example, white mist and wind chimes are familiar images; however, the juxtaposition of the bones of the legs and arms with wind chimes creates a new relation and in doing so it helps to release the imagination, suggest movement and allows for kinaesthetic experiences. Of course, it is playing with this coalescence of unrelated things and their meanings that encourages students to learn in a novel way, this being within a process of self-discovery where technical growth merges with imaginative and creative exploration. I suggest

that this metaphoric play encourages students to experience new ways of thinking, knowing, sensing, feeling, creating and dancing, which in some instances will culminate in a shift in how they present themselves and their artistic endeavours to others. It also exemplifies how these images allow the student to experience a personalized version of them so they are relevant to each individual's process and needs as they are situated in that precise moment in time. And so a multidimensional approach to learning is taking place, with self-exploration at the core of this epistemic process.

Not only is SRT unusual in that the technical and creative are fused as one but its pedagogy also provides a means by which performance artistry is nurtured. It is rare that the artistry of performance is integrated into a traditional dance technique class. It is well known that improving technical skills does not inherently develop personal artistry. Yes, key pioneers of modern codified dance techniques such as Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey discussed the nature of performance in terms of intention and having presence but the essence of *how* to aid the dancer with moving away from the quantifiable *doing* of a dance to the qualitative *being* of it is rarely touched upon. I put forward that this position of being within the dance lies in helping the dance student to form a deep connection with the whole self (physically, sensually, emotionally, cognitively), and to the self with others, and to the environment in which we all live. Thus relating and being able to access and tune into feelings and perceptions culminates in an empathetic and expressive performance. When appreciating a dance performer it is generally agreed that an expressive, artistic performance is one that touches our soul, that inspires us and which stirs something within us. In SRT we have found an approach that helps nurture aesthetic sensibility so that the student dancer can interpret and communicate movement as an embodied presence, be it when they improvise or perform set material or watch dance works.

Essentially, the nature of embodiment and presence is, of course, temporal in that the performer is fully involved in the lived moment of performance. Skinner often talks about the individual's availability and openness to receiving and aligning oneself with the images used in SRT. She refers to this process as one of 'paring away to essences that culminate in a state of transparency' (personal communication, August 2004), which I interpret as meaning that the individual surrenders the ego, learned responses, habitual patterns and releases blocked energy which allows for a free flowing energy to move through and around the whole self. Often this metaphoric 'state of transparency' results in an image moving the dancer who then becomes the dance rather than dancing it. For me this is embodied presence: being within the lived experience.

The renowned Canadian performer and teacher Peggy Baker aligns presence with energy. She says,

I think what we're responding to in a person is their energy. When the energy is moving freely as a form of expression through their body [it goes] out into space with great presence. When the energy is locked inside, they can be a good dancer but they don't really have a lot of presence.

(in Beaulieu 1996: 67)

A number of somatic practices focus on helping the individual to experience a flow of energy travelling within the self and of sending this energy out into space rather than it being contained and trapped within spaces of the anatomical self. This method of becoming aware of one's own energy and inner landscape of spaces is certainly true of SRT.

In SRT, and other practices, hands-on partner work is an exchange of energy as it is about sensing one's own energy whilst tuning into another's. In this context the act of sensing the self whilst also relating to another is helping to awaken kinaesthetic awareness so that the felt sensation is immediate, focused and meaningful. Images and activities related to the flow of energy and of the 'inner landscape of spaces opening' run through most of the fifteen introductory level SRT classes; for example in class one, students are introduced to an image of 'streams of energy' and in class four to focusing on 'spaces inside'. As classes develop they continue to explore 'inner spaces opening whilst moving' and 'directional patterns of energy' both as solo and partner work. These images become deeper and more complex: in class ten, an image is given of 'pure energy' being drawn in through the hands and feet and 'into the energy circuits of the physical self'.

These activities and images from SRT classes exemplify how somatic learning can help with experiencing the intentionality of dance with pure energy and presence whilst at the same time achieving technical principles of maximum ease of movement, a multidimensional alignment (and awareness) and suspending and expanding into space.

As this article has revealed, I firmly believe in methods that encourage a deepening of understanding body and self-awareness; however, inevitably, there will always be educators and students who are suspicious of alternative methods of education and who are sceptical, perhaps even afraid, of the spontaneous, process-led and sensory nature of somatic practice. How can we help and support those who are not convinced of the educational value of its inclusion in a dance curriculum? Fortin (2008) suggests that it is important to address values that guide practices, and that these could be approached through curriculum design, by asking questions such as: what is worth knowing? Who decides? And in whose interest is it? I suggest that we also engage in a dialogue that moves us towards developing ways in which traditional and somatic approaches can begin to connect and work together in a complementary way. Rather than viewing differences and hearing a plurality of voices, perhaps we should collaborate and move in the direction of creating a shared language whilst appreciating shared values of practice, which would result in a cohesive and well-balanced curriculum. Not only will this cultivate versatile artists but it will also help students with transference of learning, whilst challenging educators to create a new methodology.

According to Myers (1986: 46) a somatic approach to learning requires a 'different kind of discipline and patience' and 'It takes a willingness to suspend one's assumptions about how movement, especially one's own, ought to go'. Is this not at the core of all education? Where we create openness for learners to go beyond simply knowing and accepting how to do something they have learnt. That we stimulate curiosity, and provide gateways for moving away from the familiar and predictable so that learners have an opportunity to move safely towards the unpredictable and unknown. And

by doing so we enable students to gradually find a voice of their own and have a real sense of personal agency through which they are willing to take risks confidently with their academic and practice-based endeavours. In the context of somatic practice, Myer's words resonate with a pedagogy that celebrates autonomy, individuality and which cultivates a learner who has both creative movement intelligence and an articulate voice.

In light of the above if we are to really inform our students and make them aware of current practices and prepare them for gaining employment in this part of the dance industry, which is growing, thriving and respected by many, then it would seem only fair that we begin to make ample space and time (not just offering a token 90-minute class once a week) for somatic approaches and practices in higher education.

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