



Title of the article : **MOVING THINKING: Is Dance Making A Somatic Practice?**

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MOVING THINKING: Is Dance Making A Somatic Practice?

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Abstract

This article is an inquiry of thinking as moving and experiencing in order to posit dance making as a somatic practice. Theories including embodied cognition and somaesthetics are utilized to frame thinking and explore somatic work, namely the Alexander Technique. Dance making in groups is presented and considered through the author's constructed lens of thinking and the Alexander Technique.

Keywords

Alexander Technique; dance making; pedagogy; somatic practice; thinking

Biography

Julie Mulvihill is interested in how we communicate, contribute, and shift roles as we create possibilities and decisions toward a dance direction. Each dance making moment may ask different responses from its makers creating a dialogue of shared experience. Dance making practices profoundly inform Julie's ideas about teaching and learning, which in turn impact her research. Julie holds a PhD in Dance Theory and Practice from Texas Woman's University and a teaching certification in the Alexander Technique from Chesapeake Bay Alexander Studies. Julie has studied, practiced, and taught all kinds of movement in all kinds of ways with all kinds of people.

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My experience as an Alexander Technique teacher, along with my many years of somatically inclined dance pursuit, have brought me to consider somatic work as a kind of attention and cultivation of awareness in myself. The emphasis on internal perception and coordination of physical use is grounded in understanding personal habits, ideas, and experiences that bring together human physiology, anatomy, psychology, and spirituality. The many modes of somatic work that intersect with dance practice have, in my view, greatly informed and enhanced the dance field.

There are many somatic modalities to consider: Yoga, Feldenkrais Method, Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis, Kinetic Awareness, and others. Each of these modalities is unique in its approach and vocabulary; many also include codified and prescriptive movements. While the approaches may be different for each modality, there are unifying ideas within and across somatic work. These include the intentional cultivation of personal awareness and the invitation to explore good use and ease within/through the body. Dance and somatic educator Jill Green emphasizes process as an elemental aspect of somatic work with attention placed on experiencing through the body rather than the body as a mechanical instrument (Green, 2002). She writes, “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” (Green, 2002, p. 114).

While recognizing that each modality is slightly different in practice and philosophy, in this article I utilize the Alexander Technique (AT) to exemplify somatic work in general. This is a deliberate choice because relationships drive my motivation for this inquiry. Relationships with other people and with the Journal of Emerging Dance Scholarship © Julie Mulvihill

environment can perhaps be more straightforward or at least obvious, whereas relationships with ideas can seem more elusive. Ideas can be religious, cultural, and personal in nature and my contention is that a person is influenced and has a relationship with ideas to a degree that activities, postures, and choices may become affected and habituated, which in turn affect all other relationships. In my experience, AT can offer clear examples of relationships with other people, the environment, and ideas because of its unique vocabulary as well as the utilization of touch/connection between student and teacher.

Through somatic practice, I reflect on what I choose and how I make those choices. Generally, in the AT this is done with the assistance and guidance of a teacher with the aim of becoming my own teacher. With the guidance of a teacher, or autonomously on my own, I potentially encounter a personal body history with interactions and reasonings for why I choose what I do, which are inevitably dependent on relationships with people, the environment, and ideas.

Considering dance making as a collaborative practice, which has been a central tenet of my research (Mulvihill, 2017a; 2017b; 2018), I discover that often (too often?) activities that require or include “working together” disregard the importance of the interaction in the blind pursuit of a particular end. This omission is what AT practitioners call “end gaining.” Like practicing AT, I suggest that the process of making a dance can be self-actualizing and reflective in understanding what I choose and how I make those choices as affecting or including other people, the environment, and ideas. My broad view of dance making is informed by my own practice and love of making dances. My practice inevitably emphasizes the process as well as how the group of dance makers I am creating with treat and include one another within the dance making intention.

As I have previously argued (see Mulvihill, 2017a; Mulvihill 2017b; Mulvihill 2018), collaboration and contact improvisation form part of my understanding of and use of the term dance making. I consider environments where “choreography” is taking place under the umbrella of “craft,” or a specified use of tools or techniques, to be dance making. I also consider Contact Improvisation, and improvisational dance in general, to be dance making because it includes the proclivities of somatic work along with the skills of process thinking akin to choreography. This broad definition of dance making is important for researching creative process as inclusive and innovative beyond the dance field and this appeals to me as I experience and teach dance making.

Outlining my experiences and perspective about somatic work and dance making is important as my teaching and creative research serve as the impetus and evidence for this article. Green (2002) offers somatics as a methodology for learning in dance technique classes and I contend those ideas apply to research as well. Thus I employ qualitative research strategies, utilizing my personal experiences as data and understanding within the inquiry.¹ This data has been considered and written in the first person, pursuing the primary motivating question for this inquiry: Is dance making a somatic practice? This article braids together my philosophical perception of AT, my experiences in collaborative dance making settings, and my attempts at including AT in my dance making teaching. My experiences have presented me with questions, challenges, and hopes in considering dance making as a somatic practice beyond the superficial and obvious use of the body as an artistic medium and into the spheres of awareness, presence, and mindfulness that somatic practices seem to promote. This article is a result of thoughtful synergy that describes my rationale for considering dance making as a somatic practice.

For dance making within groups, at least two things happen in a rehearsal. First, decisions are made that

affect the creation of a dance in some way. Second, people collectively hold the experience of creating through sharing decision making together. These two developments are simultaneous and inseparable when considering habits and thinking as framed by AT. AT is a somatic practice and educational philosophy that encourages the belief in, and practice of, what the founder F. M. Alexander terms, *psycho-physical unity* through considered use of oneself as a whole and relational being.² Identifying habits, assessing potential for change, and evaluating choices are aspects of AT and contribute to how I am conceiving of the term ‘Use,’ which I capitalize to differentiate it from other applications of the term. I am seeking to realize that moving as an act of thinking is perhaps shared as an implicit feature of both somatic practices and dance making.

I am using ‘dance intention’ to indicate the motivating force for creating a dance. In my experience, the dance intention may range widely. The range of dance intentions may include motivations such as, but certainly not limited to, the desire to develop an aesthetic, the desire for the dance to deliver a message, or the desire to present a finished product as a performance. The dance intention may vary and change mid-process, especially within a group of dance makers where multiple intentions can exist simultaneously. The work of a group of dance makers is to, consciously or unconsciously, approach the convergence of those intentions into one multi-strand braided intention. The skills of approaching the dance intention in this way include listening, being present, and communicating. The term ‘dance intention’ as I define it here helps to fluidly orient attitudes and aspirations of dance makers as they think within a dance making experience.

Particularly for creative processes that are collaborative in nature, the dance makers have the potential to learn to listen, be present, and communicate with one another in order to make

decisions together. Somatic modalities are also practices that I employ (and hopefully enhance) listening, being present, and understanding personal needs—in other words, communicating with myself. Practicing AT and other somatic modalities brings into my awareness the ways in which I organize, mobilize, and all around use myself as a whole person. My personal Use becomes what I seek to deepen, expand, and understand through somatic practice. Listening, being present, and communicating with myself are significant skills that connect me to my reality and can help improve my functioning in activities and relationships. They are skills that, when applied to collaborative dance making, ask us to consider the Use of the group of dance makers.

It seems to me that somatic practices are purposely individually reflective. I am interested in contemplating somatic work from the perspective of a collective body. I suggest that perhaps there is a focus shift between somatic work and dance making, from the personal/internal to the dance intention, although I wonder whether those foci are really very different from each other. Whatever the focus, the skills of somatic practices and dance making certainly overlap. I am interested in this overlap, and the ways in which a focus on the personal/internal (as in somatic practices) may, in fact, be the dance intention.

Considering dance making as a somatic practice is not a particularly novel exploration but my questions include extending the skills of somatic work that affect the life and perspective of an individual to a group. How can self-awareness be applied to the group as an organism? What habits do groups create and/or change? What is the Use of the group? How can that Use improve? Do shifts within group dynamics change the possibilities for a dance making group?

In order to explore bodily knowledge and thinking occurring within somatic work and dance making, I am leaning into the theories of embodied cognition and somaesthetics. Embodied cognition, as studied by cognitive scientist Alva Noë (2004; 2009), is a theory positing thinking as a physical act. Somatic work asks practitioners to attend to experience synergistically as thought and, as dance makers create, they are engaging in thinking through movement. Pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman (2008), in building the philosophical notions of somaesthetics, puts forth that people can develop a somatic self-consciousness reflection. Attuning the feelings and actions of the body with reflection in order to understand and improve oneself is within the nature of somaesthetics. AT allows practitioners to become aware of habits, assess use, and then make changes. How might dance making allow awareness of habits, assessment of Use, and the opportunity to make changes *as a group*?

Thinking And Moving Are Synonymous

Generally as people mature, we develop synchronization with our surroundings. For example, I learned how to extend my arm, grasp a doorknob with my hand, and open a door. I have done this task countless times that now my body can effectively open doors without locating my arms or hands, or even paying deliberate attention to the task. My interpretation of what occurs is that my unconscious cognitive abilities keep me from being mired in the minutiae of the innumerable processes that my existence requires. Defining and maintaining the implicit nature of a body schema is the job of the cognitive unconscious and is inherently correlated with experience and therefore movement. My body schema provides metaphorical maps and directions so that I can think with my body.

Noë (2009) writes, “to have a normal, well-functioning body schema, then, is for one to have habits of bodily activity; it is for one to have a body

ready in the background to serve one's engaged activities" (p. 77). Noë (2009) considers habits to be necessary and contends that habits are "expressions of intelligence and understanding that allow us to navigate the world as familiar" (p.119). Without habits, the world would forever be new, unfamiliar, and alien; no strategies would be tested and reliable for responding to experiences and interacting with the world around me. Habits and their use contribute to meaning and can change my relationship with the world. They are skills and strategies on which all people depend in order to think and behave. Habits in this sense aid me in navigating my world, adjusting the world and myself as experience unfolds.

In my study and practice of AT, I perceive habit and habituation in two ways. First, Alexander (1918) and AT teachers refer to "habit" as an instinctual reaction that has been ingrained into behavior through debauched kinesthesia. As I practice AT, I become more efficient as consciousness is raised about habits that misuse my body because of a distortion in my body schema. Learning about habitual thinking and how those thoughts can change behavior allows me to move with more freedom and ease. Alexander teacher and scholar Michael Gelb (1994) writes, "Alexander found that habitual misuse adversely affected the reliability of his kinesthetic sense and that, most startling of all, his feeling of 'rightness in action' was untrustworthy" (p. 52). To put it plainly, a habit may prevent me from doing what I think I am doing.

Indeed, I may think I am choosing and navigating through a healthy physical path, but my debauched kinesthesia tricks my consciousness. Alexander (1918) writes:

man on the subconscious plane now relies too much upon a debauched sense of feeling or of sense-appreciation for the guidance of his psycho-physical

mechanism, and... he is gradually becoming more and more overbalanced emotionally with very harmful and far-reaching results. (p. 89)

While Alexander is expressly referring to "sense of feeling" about/within physical activities, I contend that this also could be true of our word choice in speech and communications, belief biases, relational assumptions, and so on. Habits can prevent me from functioning in ways that promote personal holistic wellness and relational continuity.

Alexander (2001) also refers to habit through the idea of use and developing an efficient sense of self that enables my whole body to function with ease. Like Noë (2004), Alexander suggests that habit, as use, is plastic and interdependent on other functions. AT teacher and researcher Frank Pierce Jones (1997) writes, "Habits, though learned rather than innate, involve a relation between an organism and an environment and cannot be understood by looking at the organism alone" (p. 100). Through a system of re-education, a student can learn good Use of her self, overcoming habits of poor physical use and rejuvenating consciousness about her choices and behaviors. Shusterman (2008) reflects that Alexander advocates positive habits that are functioning below the level of explicit consciousness and "the essence of such positive habits is their always remaining accessible for consciousness to monitor and revise" (p. 204). These revisions are the re-education of my thinking in relation to my ever-changing environments and support the contention that thinking and moving are synonymous.

A Deeper Look

As a somatic practitioner I believe somatic work asks people to deeply consider how thinking and lifestyle can be transformed in order to improve healthy Use. Educating and re-educating within AT philosophy follows principles that, with the help of a teacher and

hands on sensory work, allows a student to learn about personal habits, to uncover choices, and to engage in self-discovery. Principles central to AT include *primary control*, *sensory awareness*, *direction*, *inhibition*, and *means whereby*. All of these principles are active in contributing to an individual's holistic being; no principle is independent nor is any principle superior to any other.

Primary control, sometimes referred to as *primary movement* or *primary direction*, is a relationship between the head, neck, and back of all vertebrates. AT teacher Pedro de Alcantara (1999) muses that “the way you use your Primary Control determines your total co-ordination directly, and your functioning indirectly” (p. 15). Primary control is not a position but a fluid and dynamic conscious effort that brings the head, neck, and back into a relationship, allowing expansion within the body and within the possibilities of physical activity. Expansion within the body is interdependent on expansion of sensory awareness. Alcantara (1999) writes, “The only sure way of improving your sensory awareness is to improve the way you use yourself; the better your use, the more accurate the feedback you receive about yourself” (p. 89). Through primary control I become sensitized to my self and thus my surroundings. The perceptive field provides feedback for my Being and my Use within the environment.

For dance makers, primary control seems to be the dance intention in its always evolving and emerging state. Sensory awareness is not only required for my understanding and execution of the dance movement as it is determined, but also for the ways in which the dance intention becomes enacted and transformed by the choices that are made. The dance intention, like primary control, is an expansion within the body of the dance itself and relies upon sensory awareness from dance makers to suss out possibilities and a feeling of rightness or ease with what is decided.

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Noë (2004; 2009) discusses perception in several ways relating to how sensory awareness is conceived for thinking (and thus AT and dance making), calling his ideas “the enactive approach to perception” (2004, p. 1). He writes, “The process of perceiving, of finding out how things are, is a process of meeting the world; it is an activity of skillful exploration” (Noë, 2004, p. 164). The “skillful exploration” is an action that constitutes creation and production simultaneously. Sensorimotor knowledge includes “the abilities to move and point and the dispositions to respond by turning and ducking and the like” (Noë, 2004, p. 90). Through sensorimotor knowledge, experiences instantly become perceptual content and a person can make choices for action based on this content.

In building the philosophical notions of somaesthetics, Shusterman (2008) puts forth that people can develop a somatic self-consciousness reflection. Attuning the feelings and actions of the body with reflection, in order to understand and improve oneself, is one nature of somatic work. Shusterman (2008) writes that reflective self-consciousness,

is important for learning new skills and necessary for properly identifying, analyzing, and rectifying our problematic bodily habits so as to render them more appropriate to our changing conditions, tools, and tasks, and more in harmony with the changing needs and health of our basic bodily instrument. (p. 13)

Bridging Shusterman's idea with Noë's (2004) sensorimotor knowledge, AT aims to cultivate an improved sense of self-awareness through sensorimotor experiencing, the inhibition of bad habits, and the direction of good habits.

In addition to advocating for a melioristic view of somatic engagement that gives insight into how we

think, I connect reflective self-consciousness (Shusterman, 2008) to what dance makers do in creative process in order to make decisions in accordance with the dance intention. That is, dance makers generate, edit, and amend movement and, therefore, thinking. Furthermore, amendments can be made to the process. Reflecting on and improving how dance makers listen and communicate with each other as well as how we come to be present with one another is appealing. Allowing the process to be reflexive is an important notion in considering dance making as a somatic practice so that bad habits can be inhibited and good habits can be encouraged and directed. This notion is applicable from rehearsal to rehearsal but also from process to process as dance makers potentially seek to improve their Use as a group across dance works.

The scholars referenced in this essay are weaving together a view that puts forth the notion of a metaphysical mind influenced and empowered by a thinking body. From my reading of these scholars and my practice of AT, I believe there is no “mind” or “body” as separately inhabited spheres. My engagement in the world is a reciprocal enactment of my perceptual consciousness. My body and my mind are simultaneous. Continuing to frame body and mind in reference to each other, Noë (2009) contends that consciousness and experience are roughly synonymous: “I think of experience, broadly, as encompassing thinking, feeling, and the fact that a world ‘shows up’ for us in perception” (2009, p. 8). The convergence of consciousness, experience, and perception shows the intertwining nature of body and mind. Remembering Alexander’s (1918) idea of debauched kinaesthesia, a sense of how perceptions may disagree with physical use or experience remains a hurdle. Alexander offers inhibition as a way of dealing with potential disparity between perception and use.

Inhibition is a tool that allows AT practitioners to pause, recognize options, and follow through with
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considered decisions, as opposed to habitually engaging reactive behaviors. Inviting a pause and refusing to respond reactively allows an AT practitioner to “release a set of reflexes that lengthen the body and facilitate movement” (Jones, 1997, p. 11). For AT, the misuse and dis-ease within a person is caused by interferences in the reflexive working patterns that are evolutionary to humans. AT teachers and researchers Barbara Conable and Bill Conable (1991) write, “There is a relief in it [AT], in becoming embodied again. It turns out the effort is not in feeling our bodies but in not feeling them” (p. 21). By inhibiting the interferences that keep me from feeling my body, movement and functioning become expansive, light, full, and easier. While the word “inhibit” sounds like a negation of a functioning, it is actually the freeing of the physical dispositions that are natural. Inhibition allows me to develop a keener and more complex sensorimotor functioning thereby enhancing perception and experience. Inhibition can enable me to release unnecessary tension and defenses that prohibit me from refining knowledge and directing thinking processes.

Direction is a concept that Alexander (2001) uses to “indicate the process involved in projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms and in conducting the energy necessary to the use of these mechanisms” (p. 35). In other words, my brain and nervous system carry chemical messages that coordinate my systems and enact my choices. Likewise, the information I receive from my limbs and organs inform the nervous system. The simultaneous effect of inhibiting the interferences that keep me from physical efficiency while directing awareness through primary control and sensorimotor function reflects thinking and an interaction with the environment. As I interact with the environment my perception shifts and my directing energies within my body also shift.

Direction for AT can be enacted without words through sensorimotor functioning; however, words can help understand the “orders” that Alexander lays out for applying direction. Alcantara (1999) offers a familiar phrase in Alexander’s teaching, ““Let your neck be free, to let your head go forward and up, to let the back lengthen and widen, all together, one after the other”” (p. 33). As an AT practitioner, I believe it is important to recognize that the words used in the “orders” are invitational and not commanding. Directing is about *allowing* the principles to simultaneously coordinate the complex intertwining of thinking.

Alexander (1918) writes that directions “represent merely a cultivation and development of the *means* whereby he may find adequate and satisfying release for his potentialities” (p. 135). The “means whereby” is the process of coordinating thinking. Alexander (1918) realized that in activity people tend to “end gain” instead of paying attention to the ways in which the activities are fulfilled. By inhibiting old reactive habits, AT practitioners can pause, renew primary control, and direct energies in order to enjoy the journey of somatically engaging in the activity with good Use. Alexander (2001) writes, “these preliminary acts, though means are also ends but not isolated ends, inasmuch as they form a co-ordinated series of acts to be carried out ‘all together, one after the other’” (p. 42). The emphasis of AT is on enjoying the journey an individual takes when performing an activity.

The principles as outlined here are simultaneous and in some cases happen implicitly. For AT, the idea is to re-educate and dissolve bad reactive habits in order to diminish the amount of negative interference so that new more adaptable and efficient habits can form. AT is a philosophy of learning, a framework for self-awareness and improvement, aside from the new habits that may develop. The hope is that in practicing AT, I am able to inhabit the learning philosophy implicitly and come to rely on my Journal of Emerging Dance Scholarship © Julie Mulvihill

cognitive unconscious to continue healthy functioning and interaction. Alexander (1918; 2001) believed that human potential is much greater than individuals generally enact, and that culture, technology, and fear keep people from fulfilling their evolutionary capabilities. My relationship with my environment informs how I am able to think because the environment dictates, in some sense, how I am able to move.

Change And Making/Making Change

I believe dance making is an activity in revealing and exploring personal aesthetics, biases, and habits. A dance maker can fundamentally shift the course of a process by improving listening skills, understanding and deepening a sense of presence, and practicing constructive communication. *How* a process unfolds seems vitally important to *what* is possible to consider and, ultimately, to be accomplished. Shusterman (2008) describes somaesthetics as “concerned with the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthetics) and creative self-fashioning” (p. 1). This description suggests to me that through somatic practice people choreograph themselves, in a way. The somatic experience becomes a personal dance making practice, where the “dance” that is made is my “self.” It follows that because dance making can be a collaborative experience of relationships and fluidity, then somatic work might also be practiced in the functional unfurling of group dynamics and our interconnectedness.

AT is fundamentally based on autonomy. Alcantara (1999) puts AT priorities bluntly, “Our first duty is to change ourselves, and to let others change themselves, when they are ready to change, and if they want to change” (p. 43). Alcantara’s statement is representative of traditional activities in dance making rehearsal as well. As a dance maker, I make the appropriate adaptations with my environment and

within the swirl of what I learn and understand about the dance intention; I perceive the environment, imagine the possibilities, and make choices. These actions are simultaneous, and it is through the interactions of dance makers changing our own and each other's perceptions that the dance emerges.

The pedagogy for AT often includes hands-on experiences between the teacher and the student. As an AT practitioner, I follow my perception of current trends in AT to cultivate a kind of touching technique that is not manipulative, but rather allows a student to feel her own processes in more acute ways to thereby gain explicit awareness of habitual behavior patterns in movement. Through the contact, the student may (hopefully) realize other choices for directing the use of the self. Touching in AT is not therapeutically oriented, although a practitioner may feel relief from pain or discomfort. In AT teacher training, it was established for me that AT teachers do not treat or fix problems; rather a teacher is a guide or facilitator to awakening awareness of habit and aiding the direction for good use within a student. AT is, by nature, a student-centered learning philosophy that requires the active investigation and spirit of experimentation of interested students. My experience as both teacher and student of AT has taught me that embedded in the technique is self-learning and a student must be open to learning from and about herself with guidance from her teacher.

My use of touch in an AT lesson is to help focus a student into her own habits as well as the benefits of primary control and conscious direction. As an AT teacher I use touch to stimulate awareness and to sense the movement within the student. This kind of touch is not manipulative, restrictive, or coercive; inciting or instigating an experience is not the idea. Rather, an experience exists and, through touch, a student (and teacher as well) comes to understand the experience in a new way. The change that occurs is both shared and individual simultaneously.

Similarly, in my experience in a dance making rehearsal, dance makers seek to create and thus propose to make change within ourselves because of the interactions we have with one another, with ideas, with space, with time and other factors. In this way, I understand dance making rehearsal to be a co-experience of shared thinking while also a revealing experience of a dance maker's own attitudes and choices. The backdrop of the creative environment and the interactions of other dancers and/or dance makers in that environment invite a dance maker to consider how she is engaging in the process.

Dance makers become both teacher and student in an Alexander sense. They feel one another's responses and create the dance and thinking together. Jones (1997) writes that "The teacher's hands are like a catalytic agent in a chemical experiment. They release a process that goes on without them" (p. 155). I posit that even without touch, dance makers, like AT practitioners, create amongst themselves as well as between performers and audience. This occurs through a process that connects bodies sensorially and perceptively, like a catalytic agent in a chemical experiment.

As a guest artist in dance at Wesleyan University in Middletown Connecticut, I facilitated six student dance makers and two student musicians³ who explored collaboration through improvisation and then designed a performance piece entitled *Composing Compromise: A Performance Collage* in the fall of 2018. Over the course of the process, the dance makers designed a structured score with spatial and temporal landmarks to ground the otherwise improvisational nature of the performance. Occasionally moving with the dance makers in rehearsal, the musicians eventually began recording sounds from rehearsals. The sounds and discussions from rehearsals were abstracted to become a footprint of the performance sound score, representing the history and psychology of the

working and a kind of nuanced body schematic of the dance itself.

For the performance, eight speakers were set up: four on each short side of the rectangular performance space. During the performance, one musician, who was visibly stationed at a computer in the performance space, set off interruptions to the sound score that were broadcasted by one of the eight speakers. The interruptions were not preset, so it was unknown which speaker would broadcast the interruption ahead of time. The second musician would run through the performance space, and through the throng of moving dance makers, in order to turn off the speaker broadcasting the interruption. The dance makers had to accommodate the running musician as well as the sound interruptions into the performance. The interruptions and the acts taken in response to those interruptions were never practiced in rehearsal.

The work of the group in the performance moment became an exercise in making aesthetic and practical choices. In negotiating the dance makers' movements, the running musician perhaps had to wait and allow for a rushing slide or swirling lift before passing to get to a speaker. Similarly, a dance maker might have had to resist being startled as a speaker abruptly blared a few seconds of a pop song. The group had to be incredibly aware of each other to avoid accidents and to allow for each person to fulfill their particular job. Additionally, the dance makers and musicians had to recognize habits in their personal aesthetics as well as in the overarching aesthetic and development of the piece.

This dance making experience invited the group to find ways of tuning in with one another and listening to one another as an activity that happens beyond the ears. The work of the group in rehearsal became about noticing each other, being present together, and enjoying the delight of the unexpected and ambiguous. The focus and Use of the group in
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rehearsal centered on being able to voice needs and accommodate them together, improving healthy ways of interacting while following particular agreed-upon directives. In short, the group practiced compromise, not as an action of diluting a principle or commodifying ideas, but as an action of uplifting the ability to work things out together as a principle: sharing the thinking and creating.

A regular practice the group implemented in rehearsal included making suggestions and trying options. This was really important, especially in the beginning of the eight-week process, for the dance intention to emerge and be allowed to evolve. The group discussed every option for organizing, developing, and editing material and made trials of the options before deciding together. Some decisions were simple, in that the trial of a particular option was universally resolute and negated the need to explore other options. Other decisions required marrying parts of one option with aspects of others in order to find a reasonable and pleasing option that was acceptable to the whole group. It was never formalized but the group operated on a loose consensus process for making decisions. If a dance maker was not present in rehearsal, they were briefed on updates but not consulted for decisions made at the time of their absence. Because there were many experiments and changes made within the process, the dance makers were gracious with each other in allowing for adaptability.

Further, the group engaged in a practice I call Reinforcement (Mulvihill, 2018). In the last few minutes of each rehearsal, the dance makers gathered to reflect and support, or reinforce, decisions made in the process that day. Reinforcement for this group of dance makers was a way of recalling changes made, requesting issues to address in the future, celebrating perceived successes, and encouraging needs to be expressed positively or differently. Each dance maker began a contribution with the phrase, "I would like to reinforce," and then completed the

sentence with their hope, memory, joke, or desire. In this way, the group collectively brought to life Shusterman's reflective self-consciousness about the actions of itself, the group. The dance makers concerned themselves with the organism of the group and engaged in an effort to improve understanding and group Use.

Although these are not novel practices for dance making, the process this particular group executed serves to exemplify the skills of inhibition and direction while attending to *means whereby*, which was an innovative method. The group was able to recognize habits among their interactions, pause to perceive options, consider together, and make decisions that they could agree were shared. In this way, the group directed their energies and interactions and developed a dynamic Use as a group. This Use invited the group members to feel prepared for the interruptions in the performance and allowed them to cultivate trust with each other, making the unexpected moments in the performance familiar, acceptable, and, perhaps, even delightful.

What If It Is All Wrong?

Many traditional learning situations favor the expectations that a student is an empty vessel and the knowledgeable and wise teacher pours experience and opportunity into the student, pushing and pulling the student into a particular shape.⁴ AT, and somatic practices in general, does not subscribe to this pedagogical idea,⁵ but a student entering the practice with this expectation may find the learning environment not conducive to her learning style or to a cultivation of an empowered thinking process for her. Perhaps AT is not, after all, melioristic and does not really promote the unity of body and mind. Further, perhaps dance making is not a connective co-experience, but rather one in which a particular dance maker imprints ideas and movement in ways that dancers are able to imitate and embrace exactly as directed.

Thinking itself may not, in reality, unfold as discussed in this essay. Perception and consciousness may be limited and linear, and cognition may not be extended to schema or transactional with the environment. Philosopher Andy Clark (2008) suggests that the enactive approach to perception discussed earlier sets up a presumption of engaging a person holistically. He comments that "this pre-commitment [to the whole] works against taking truly seriously the evidence for deep dissociations between vision for action and vision for perception" (Clark, 2008, p. 193). Clark (2008) discusses the skills that result from a "dual-stream model" (p. 193) instead of thinking about the perceiver as a whole. If this is the case, then not only is perceptual experience the same for all people but it is also separate from the influence of deep sensorial information, nominally taking the body out of thinking.

Perhaps movement has nothing to do with thinking and the body is separate from the mind. Perhaps I do not rely on the environment or schema to hold information accessible and, instead, I first think of a representation before acting and I input all detail into a rational mind circuitry. From this perspective, the way I have presented thinking is not possible because perception is not an interactive skillful enterprise.

Still, a representational approach to thinking cannot begin to explain or approximate creative experiences or relational aspects of either AT or dance making. When considering somatic work and dance making, enactive perception and embodied cognition seem useful in pointing out how moving and thinking are synonymous. Despite the acknowledged difficulties of studying and practicing AT, it is one way of framing thinking and creating. Alexander (1918) writes, "In re-educating the individual, therefore, the first effort must be directed to the education of the conscious mind" (p. 199). This education happens in activity which then is deepened to the subconscious through the facilitation of AT principles. Likewise,

thinking is established through intentional transactions that evoke creative decision making such as in a dance making process.

Is Dance Making A Somatic Practice?

In this article I have explored thinking through the lenses of embodied cognition and AT in order to consider dance making as a somatic practice. The coupling of personal somatic awareness with awareness of the world supports the reciprocity of sensorimotor functions for perceptual understanding and in making the connection between experience and reason. Interactions and experiences with the world around me allow me to develop and evolve my conceptual understanding of how I function within an environment. This is especially significant considering dance making and the development of a dance intention. I wonder about the emergence and transformational aspects of dance intentions and if/how dance makers come to recognize (together) what that intention might be. As a dance maker, I might ask: What are we doing here? And then: What can I do to support and encourage what we are doing? The answers to these questions may be different from rehearsal to rehearsal, which exemplifies the continuous and ever-changing nature of the creative process. I am reliant on my personal sensorimotor system to situate me within the relational schema of the creative process.

In my experience of researching and participating in dance making within groups, relationships and the interactions of the dance makers become what is interesting to me about dance making. Especially in an educational setting, the *how* a dance is made can be much more fascinating and enlightening an experience for emerging dance artists than the dance product. It becomes significant to consider the skills necessary to improve the Use of the group. Like somatic work, recognizing habits and being willing to re-educate ourselves to improve awareness, communication, attention, and recognize biases can

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give rise to deeper understanding of power, communication, and specific group dynamics within a dance making process.

Considering dance making as a somatic practice opens the possibilities for personal growth that extend beyond the particular creative process. Within the practice of AT, as with all somatic work, is the hope of improving all activity; there is an aspiration that somatic work will bring our whole selves into the world more fluidly, easefully, and authentically. Dance making, as well, offers personal insight into how we treat other people and what we expect from ourselves and from others: valuable information to reflect on even apart from creative process.

In the introduction of the article I mentioned my skepticism about a perceived difference between the objectives of somatic work and dance making. My presumption is that a focus of somatic work is personal/internal, while a focus of dance making is the dance intention. Perhaps when dance makers allow the dance intention to be (or include) creating a reflective dialogical creative environment for the process, then the personal/internal dynamics of the group are being considered, habits revealed, and the potential for change and learning is possible. It is easy to give lip service to this kind of working and, just like somatic work, engaging in skills like listening, being present, and communicating require practice, experimentation, and an openness to face unexpected challenges. Still, dance making as a somatic practice can critically engage people to strive for deeper personal and interpersonal connections, which perhaps may lead to a more respectful and harmonious existence.

Endnotes

1. See Leavy (2009) particularly Chapter 6, for a discussion of methodology in terms of phenomenology and dance as data. Liamputtong and Rumbold (2008) present a text wherein Chapter 6, Chapter 9, and Chapter 13 are particularly helpful in understanding dance as method and first-person experience and narrative in research. See Wolcott (2009) for a defense of the use of first-person narrative writing in qualitative research (p.16-18).
2. My contemporary interpretation of “psycho-physical unity” is a belief that there is no separation between the mental and physical processes of an individual. In this way, experience is central to understanding thinking. See Gelb (1994) p. 38-41 for a description of his understanding of the idea and how he explains it to his students.
3. Musicians are considered ‘dance makers’ for the process being described. I am distinguishing the roles in this article to simplify and highlight the fluidity of the group and the ways in which we employed change, awareness, presence, and communication.
4. Traditional learning is a term generally accepted to represent techniques such as strict adherence to textbooks, rote memorization, and conditioning as optimal learning strategies for students. For dance practice specifically, traditional learning situations include an authoritarian culture where students are required to imitate the teacher (Dragon, 2015).
5. See Green (2002) for a discussion of the process-based student-centered nature of somatic practices.

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