

SOMATIC LITERACY: BRINGING SOMATIC EDUCATION INTO PHYSICAL EDUCATION¹

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With one foot in Physical Education and one foot in Somatic Education, I have long been interested in ways to include within physical education the important educational innovations which are part of the field of somatic education. The addition of somatic education methods to the field of physical education would broaden the concept of physical education far beyond the current focus areas of sports and fitness. Physical education would embrace body and movement training as it applies to any human endeavor, and physical educators would become consulting experts employed in a vast range of human activities.

This article will illustrate some of the basic concepts and processes of somatic education. It will indicate how somatic education could take its place within the field of physical education and how the profession of physical education would change as a result. The article will begin with a survey of the areas that somatic education deals with and then will provide a case study to give readers a more concrete idea of what somatic education is like in practice.

Speaking as broadly as possible, somatic education can be defined as the educational field which examines the structure and function of the body as processes of lived experience, perception and consciousness². Somatic education deals with the whole

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² This term was introduced by Thomas Hanna, who was a philosophy professor and a practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method® of movement awareness training. See: Hanna, Thomas. *Bodies in Revolt: A Primer in Somatic Thinking*. 1970. Holt, Rhinehart & Winston. New York. See also the journal *Somatics*, which he founded in 1976. Eleanor Criswell Hanna, Editor. 1516 Grant Ave #212, Novato, CA 94945.

human being, focusing in a practical way on the interactions of posture, movement, emotion, thought, self-concept and cultural values.

There are a broad variety of somatic education methods, and different methods focus in different ways and to different degrees on each of the elements of body, mind and spirit³. However, the only way to discuss somatic education with any degree of concreteness is to refer to one particular approach. Though the material in this article derives from Being In Movement® mindbody training, the somatic approach I have developed⁴, the article will illustrate basic concepts that many somatic disciplines share and will indicate how somatic education could take its place within the field of physical education.

SOMATIC LITERACY FOR LIFELONG WELLNESS

For greatest safety, health, productivity, comfort and enjoyment, people must understand and be skilled in the operation of the mindbody unity. This intellectual/experiential knowledge is what I call “somatic literacy”, and it is an essential element in lifelong wellness. Somatic education can offer physical education an expanded vision of what it means to move effectively and live well as a physical being. It can also offer a variety of specific body and movement techniques for achieving this vision. The following brief consideration of the elements of somatic literacy will be fleshed out by the case study to be presented afterwards.

BODY AWARENESS TRAINING

Somatic education begins with body awareness training, which is the cultivation of the ability to notice and feel sensations in the body. Many people have paid so little attention to their bodies that they are unaware of a lot of what happens inside themselves. They may simply miss noticing various events in their bodies or they may lump various internal processes together into large vague sensations and consequently

³ Among the older, more influential somatic methods are the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method®, Rolfing (Structural Integration), Laban Movement Analysis, and Charlotte Selvers' Sensory Awareness. There are many other newer somatic methods, such as Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's Body/Mind Centering, Hellerwork, Aston Patterning, Trager Work, Hanna Somatic Education, Rosen Work, Pauls' Ortho-Bionomy and so on.

⁴ My movement home is Aikido, a non-violent Japanese martial art, which I have been practicing and teaching for twenty-four years. In addition, I am an instructor of the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education, hold a black belt in Karate and have had a number of years of Alexander work. All these movement trainings have shaped my own somatic work, which is particularly concerned with the geometry of intention and the balanced state of power and love as the basis for action.

miss the details and richness of their inner experience. As an example of this, in the case study you will read of an individual who was mystified by the presence of pain in his shoulder when he played the piano. The pain was caused by the slumped posture with which he played, but since he simply didn't notice the sensations of compression and strain attendant upon the slumping, he had no clue that his posture was causing his pain. Once people learn how to identify events taking place within themselves, they can go on to learn ways of evaluating, taking control of and improving their somatic lives.

RELAXATION AND STRESS MANAGEMENT

Through learning to monitor and reduce inappropriate levels of tension in muscles, breathing and posture, people can learn to handle stress in more healthful ways.⁵ Relaxation techniques are often thought of as passive, quiescent ways of releasing all tension from muscles. However, in addition to passive relaxation techniques for resting and recuperating after experiencing stress, active relaxation techniques can help people function in a relaxed and effective manner even during stressful or strenuous activity. Functioning in a more relaxed manner not only prevents stress but also improves performance. As an example of the use of active relaxation, the case study will show how the pianist I worked with learned to stay relaxed and alert in facing the stress of playing for hostile audiences.

EFFICIENCY OF POSTURE AND MOVEMENT

Most people are not aware of how their bodies operate biomechanically. Through greater awareness of the anatomical basis for powerful yet relaxed movement, people can improve their ability to move in precise, efficient, economical, graceful and strain-free ways. They can improve their comfort and performance at any physical task and prevent injuries. This learning would clearly be useful in areas such as industry, music performance and sports performance.

However, the awareness of postural and movement efficiency must include more than just intellectual understanding of biomechanics and simple physical practice of correct movements. In order for people to change such fundamental aspects of the self as body image and movement style, they must gain a deep somatic experience of the emotional, cultural and spiritual significance of their movement choices. All of these “non-physical” elements of a person’s makeup influence his or her perceptions of what movements are beautiful, socially acceptable, effective and possible, and these elements must be addressed in helping people make new choices about what to be and how to move.

⁵ For detailed instructions on how to do the basic breathing, body awareness, and centering exercises I teach, see the file *A Downloadable Script for the Eight Core BIM Exercises* on my website, www.being-in-movement.com.

Two especially important applications in this area are prevention of back problems and repetitive motion injuries (RMI). Back pain is a major health problem in this country, and treatment of back pain is a major health care cost. Much back pain is caused by incorrect ways of doing such movements as lifting, pushing, or supporting weight. Repetitive motion injuries are serious disabilities caused by long-term repetition of physically strained movements, and repetitive motion injuries too are a major health care cost and a major burden on business and industry. A prime example of RMI is carpal tunnel syndrome among computer users, which is at least partly caused by incorrect posture and body use in typing. With all the human suffering caused by back pain and RMI, and with all the money spent on treating these problems, an educational, preventative approach would offer many benefits, and it is surprising that this is not already a major component of physical education.

The greater grace and ease of movement conferred on people by improvements in biomechanical efficiency would also enhance the sense of physical well-being and joy experienced by people in their daily lives, and this would increase the likelihood of their participation in traditional physical education and recreation activities. Physical education often fails to encourage the people who need it most, those who are very un-physical and feel awkward and ashamed about engaging in fitness activities. Somatic education methods offer a chance of bringing those people into the fold of active movers.

EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

It may seem odd to suggest that physical education is the appropriate arena within which to help people cultivate emotional and spiritual self-awareness. However, emotions and spiritual states are fundamentally physical events in the body, and a physical approach to self-awareness training offers a method of making this area of practice more tangible and concrete.

We do not usually think of feelings as physical events in the body. The experience of these events is what we usually refer to when we speak of our feelings, but the feelings themselves are composed of changes in heart rate, muscle tone, breathing, posture and so on. Some people have a hard time with this concept. It often helps to conduct a simple thought experiment. Imagine what you would feel if you were given a drug that kept you at basal metabolic rate and prevented any changes whatever. Without any changes in your body, you could not experience anger, with its clenched fists and racing pulse, or sadness or joy with their physical changes, or any other emotion. Thinking about it this way, it is clear that emotions really are rooted in the body.

By noticing physical details in their bodies, people can get in touch with their feelings. If they scan their bodies to discover where events are taking place and what exactly is happening at those spots, and then pay attention to what those events feel like, they will begin to notice and experience feelings that they may have been unclear about or completely unaware of. This generally is of great help in sorting out personal and interpersonal confusions. In fact, many people who have studied with me while concomitantly undergoing psychotherapy have reported that only after somatic

awareness training enabled them to identify and experience their feelings were they able to derive full benefit from psychotherapy.

Not only does somatic training enable people to identify feelings, but it also enables people to construct and access feelings and mental states that have been unavailable to them. People can use somatic processes to create and use in their lives states of emotional power, stability, assertiveness, empathy, love, nurturance and so on.

Breathing and postural exercises can help people improve mental focus and concentration. Making use of somatic processes to help students develop better concentration in sports and academic studies would certainly enhance the value and effectiveness of physical education.

Drug abuse education is another area in which somatic education can make important contributions. As people gain more sensitivity to their own bodies and more experience with the feeling of physical/mental relaxation, empowerment and clarity, they realize quite directly that drugs really do interfere with their abilities to perform well and get what they want out of life. As people gain more inner power and self-control, they can face problems such as family violence and sexual abuse that are often the root of drug use. And the cultivation of self-awareness and assertiveness possible with somatic education can help people understand and resist pressures by their peers to use drugs.

SOCIAL AWARENESS

A primary social effect of somatic education is an improved awareness of other people. Becoming aware of one's own body results in generally greater sensitivity to the world around one, and in particular it results in greater sensitivity to what other people are doing and feeling in their bodies. This enhanced sensitivity leads to greater awareness of non-verbal communication and, consequently, to more effective social interaction. Greater awareness of other people increases sensitivity to and consideration of their needs. At the same time, greater awareness of oneself leads to increased awareness of appropriate boundary control, so other people's needs and one's own needs are more easily kept in balance.

Conflict resolution is an important skill that can be taught through somatic methods. By learning to monitor and control their physical responses, people can reduce specific fight-or-flight tensions in themselves and learn to stay in a state of relaxation and mental/physical clarity during disagreements. This will lead to a reduction of interpersonal tensions and a better chance for effective communication. More than that, increasing people's sensitivity to and empathy with others reduces their inclination to use violence as a means of settling conflicts. People become more inclined to act in socially respectful and productive ways.

Clearly, this is a way of addressing the general area of moral education through somatic processes. I think it is fair to say that our bodies function best in states of harmony and honesty, and by becoming sensitive to what goes on in their bodies as they

attempt to make life choices, people can gain a better understanding of what ethical, life-affirming actions are.

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

Environmental degradation is a key problem in our world, and environmental education is becoming more and more important. Here too, physical education could make a significant contribution via somatic education methods. People who cannot even feel themselves will have so little empathy for other living creatures and the earth itself that they will unthinkingly and unfeelingly despoil the soil, water and air. Greater sensitivity to, empathy with and compassion for oneself and the world around one includes being sensitive to the condition and needs of the whole planetary ecosystem. It means feeling oneself as part of the web of life rather than separate from it. The idea of incorporating body awareness training into environmental education is simply an extension of the other themes discussed above.

Properly speaking, physical education is the study of what it is to be alive in a human body. Physical education is an intensely practical study of what it is to live well, and all the important human issues can be addressed through their somatic component. I would go so far as to say that they cannot be addressed with maximal effectiveness without including some attention to their somatic component.

Making a somatic approach a fundamental element of physical education would vastly broaden the scope and importance of the profession. It may seem to be a radical departure from sports and physical fitness, but the germs of this approach have been in the profession all along in the attention paid to physical activity as embracing mind, body and spirit and in the emphasis on learning such elements as self-esteem, teamwork and cooperation through sports participation. Somatic education methods can provide for the profession of physical education tools for better achieving what has been part of our professional definition all along.

CASE STUDY

The best way to make the process of somatic education real to readers is to provide an opportunity for vicarious participation in the training. The following case study concerns a jazz pianist I recently worked with who was experiencing disabling pain in his upper right arm when he played.

Readers should keep in mind that from the somatic point of view there are no physical education activities as such. Any activity could be a focus for body/movement awareness training. Typing on a computer keyboard, playing a piano, kicking a soccer ball, driving a car, filling a cavity in a patient's tooth, dancing a ballet, or reading a book — all these are physical activities and can be done in a more or less somatically literate

manner. I chose this case study because it the best example I have in my case files of how a broad range of somatic elements interact with each other. Readers who are particularly concerned with sports, dance and recreation activities will, I am sure, see that many elements of the case study could apply just as well to skills in those areas.

The case study is based on my own approach to somatic work, which I call Being In Movement® mindbody education. This body education method focuses on learning to sense in and through the body how choice or intention operates to give form to the body and to action. In teaching, I concentrate on dealing with objective biomechanical facts of posture and movement as both manifestations and causes of subjective states of awareness, consciousness, feeling and thought. I focus on how the mind/body organizes itself for action in the world and on how people restrict their capacities for action.

The jazz pianist I worked with was experiencing disabling pain in his upper right arm when he played. After five private lessons and five sessions of a class for musicians, he had changed the way he used his body as he played, and his arm no longer hurt. As you will see, the lessons involved a fascinating interweaving of work with the pianist's body mechanics and work with the emotional, cultural and philosophical meanings that underlay the body mechanics.

An important aspect of somatic education is that even when the problem the student presents involves pain or other dysfunction, the pain itself is not the focus of the lessons and there is no attempt to fix or cure the pain. The somatic approach is primarily a teaching or preventative approach, rather than a treatment or curative approach. Simply by learning how to use his whole self well, the pianist's performance was optimized and the pain disappeared on its own. If the pianist had come for somatic lessons before he had ever experienced any shoulder pain, he would have learned good somatic habits and avoided his shoulder difficulties. (If a student comes for somatic education because of a specific physical or emotional problem, it is generally important to have him/her examined by medical or mental health professionals. In many cases, a team approach involving somatic education as well as medical and/or psychological treatment will be most effective.)

At the beginning of our first lesson, I watched how the pianist sat, stood and walked, and I noticed that rather than using his body as an evenly balanced, unified whole, his posture was lopsided and tense. His left shoulder was higher than his right. His left leg was stronger than the right, and he used it more for weight support. When he played the piano, he sat hunched over the keyboard. I decided to focus our lessons on how to sit at the piano in a relaxed and upright posture.

I began by helping the pianist gain conscious awareness of the tension and imbalances in the way he used his body. We continued with work on relaxation, focusing on the muscles of the belly, breathing and pelvic floor since relaxation of these core muscles is the key to free, powerful and balanced use of the body as a whole. Once the pianist could relax, he was ready to learn how to sit in a way that would be more balanced and efficient. I had him sit and experiment with the movements of slumping down and

sitting back up straight. As he did this, I helped him experience how slumping is caused by rotating the pelvis backward (the direction in which the guts would spill to the rear out of the pelvic bowl) and how straightening back up is accomplished by rotating the pelvis forward. Further, we worked on using the psoas rather than the back extensors to initiate the movement of rising up out of the slump. He could feel that this alignment and use of the pelvis allowed a stable, strong, relaxed and comfortable positioning of the torso.

Once he could sit well, we started practicing how to do various actions such as walking, pushing, pulling and lifting in the same stable, relaxed and comfortable manner. However, these actions involved more effort, and when he exerted strength, he lost his awareness of the relaxed, stable way of using the core of his body. He hardened and constricted his movements. In particular, he elevated his chest and stiffened his back. When I asked him about it, he realized that trying hard was part of his image of what strength was and that that created excess tension in many of his movements. This idea that strength is tough and hard is, of course, very common in our culture.

We talked about how this habit of constriction affected his playing, and he began to understand that when he played the piano he was forcing his muscles to move against internal resistance, creating strain just when he needed to move in the freest possible manner. He realized that that was a major factor in the pain he experienced while playing, and he found that he could keep his body free and open and still generate the power needed to play the piano.

Up to this point, we had stuck to practicing movement at the piano and had not worked with actually playing music. When I asked him to play something, I noticed that as soon as he began to play, he lost the state of relaxed, open body use we had been cultivating. In particular, he lost his awareness of his pelvis and breathing and shifted into a state of existence in which he seemed to be primarily head and hands. It seemed that when he played, he felt that eyes to see, ears to hear and hands to play contained all of his musical being, and the rest of his body was beside the point. And in losing his body, he went back to the patterns of muscular tension and imbalance that he had displayed when I first saw him. When I reminded him that music came from all of himself and that he needed to feel his whole body and use it well, he began moving in a way that made his arms felt lighter and freer, and he was able to execute pain-free movements at the piano.

At the beginning of the next lesson, he said that in practicing at home he had felt that his arm worked better when he used his body the way I had showed him. However, when I watched him play and really get into the music, I saw that he rolled his pelvis back and hunched himself down over the keys just as he had done when I first saw him. When I asked him about it, he said that he didn't like playing with his head upright and his body open because, as a jazz pianist, he often played in bars. People in the audience were frequently drunk and unpleasant, and his overwhelming desire was to go into himself and the piano and the music and create a barrier between himself and his audience.

He said also that the posture of hunching over the piano, getting into the keyboard, was part of the way jazz pianists played. He explained that it had to do with the

essential process of jazz improvisation. Because he had no written down, pre-ordained piece of music to play, he couldn't go in with a plan but had to throw himself on the mercy of the moment. The pianist said he leaned close to the instrument to get himself into it, directing his attention away from the sounds of the room and into the sound of the piano. He was trying to find the next notes he was going to play, focusing on the instrument as the crucial source for the next musical thought.

In adopting the hunched over posture as a means of self-protection, he was dealing with personal issues of vulnerability and safety. In order to help him understand what he was doing somatically to handle the intrusive quality of the audience, I set up a safe, small-scale intrusion for him to practice with. I walked up to him and began to pull on his mustache. That was certainly an intrusive action, and though he knew we were only role-playing, nonetheless he felt the violation emotionally and physically. His initial reaction was to harden himself in order to protect himself both physically and emotionally. (Though some readers may find themselves uncomfortable with this direct approach to examining feelings of vulnerability, it was in fact a respectful and effective way of helping the pianist discover and overcome habits of behavior which made him weak and vulnerable.)

I reminded him that he had already learned that hardening and constricting his breath and muscles would destroy his ability to move in a relaxed and therefore powerful and effective manner. I reminded him of how softening and opening the pelvis and breathing would allow more effective movement. Then, in addition, I showed him an exercise for making himself "warm hearted" and loving. I had him think of something or someone in his life that he loved, something that made his heart glad, and I asked him to notice the body events that were part of that emotion. Those body events involved softening of his chest and breathing as well as sensations of warmth in his chest.

By combining both the pelvic and heart softening exercises, he was able to manufacture a psychophysical state of compassionate power. He experienced that that led on the physical level to improved coordination and use of strength and on the psychological level to a perceptive and humane use of his power. When I pulled his mustache again, by staying in the state of compassionate power, he was able to push me away from him in a gentle yet powerful and effective manner. He learned that letting go of his barriers and opening up emotionally and physically did not mean becoming vulnerable. On the contrary, it lessened his vulnerability by putting him in touch with his ability to feel what he wanted and then act effectively to achieve it. He realized that he could open himself and his music to his audience without being hurt by that, and so he could sit upright at the piano and still feel safe playing.

The last topic we dealt with was the way he went into his piano to find his next musical thought. I pointed out that his thoughts actually came from deep within himself, though he had created a complex feedback loop between himself and his instrument in which each exerted influence over the other. He was really talking about a fundamental element of the creative process that, like breathing, had both an inward and outward beat.

He had to go inward to feel his musical impulse, and he had to go outward to the piano and the sound to execute the musical thought and gain further musical inspiration.

However, in locating the source of musical thought in the instrument, he actually to some extent lost his experience of his inward self. Locating the source of thought in the piano made him hunch over and that made his arm hurt, but to play with an erect posture he needed to readjust his very idea of what it was to think. He literally had to remold his Self into a new more symmetrical and expansive shape in order to achieve a balance between the inward and outward functions of creativity. Once he was able to create the new somatic shape, he was able to access new power and sensitivity in the creative process, and the new shape also reduced the strain on his arm.

This case study illustrates many important features of somatic education. The pianist came with a legitimate physical trauma, but one which wasn't treatable medically because it wasn't really a physical problem. It involved numerous cultural, emotional and spiritual elements. However, it wouldn't have been treatable psychologically because it was indeed a physical problem and the musculoskeletal analysis was a key to solving it. In actuality it was a somatic learning problem and only somatic reeducation could have solved it.

Thinking about the definition of somatic education, it is clear that the problem was solved by examining the elements of physical structure and function as processes of lived experience, awareness and meaning. In fact, rather than focusing on solving the problem he presented when he first came for lessons, mastery of the self of the performer was the key aim of the lessons. Through learning to act on the basis of fundamental principles of mind/body coordination, the pianist found that his particular problem became solved.

A fundamental principle of my work is that in a practical way there really is no separation between mind, body and spirit. Musculoskeletal processes and psychological/spiritual processes reflect and shape each other. A person's habits of posture and movement are intimately the same as his or her choices about what to be, how to act in the world, and what to believe the world is. Therefore, in improving the specifics of a person's way of moving, it is important to work with everything from the body mechanics of the action, to the emotional and interpersonal feelings involved, to the cultural mandates for movement and action, and to the world view which underlies the individual's sense of self.

This process of education can be undertaken as a preventative discipline before distinct problems have had time to develop or as a way of regaining wholeness of self even after specific problems have developed. Somatic literacy is a key element in helping people lead healthy and productive lives.

CONCLUSIONS

This article is an attempt to examine the profession of physical education and what it could become by including somatic work at the core of its mission. It is accepted in the profession of physical education that our work concerns the whole human being and works toward creating changes in the psychomotor, cognitive and affective domains. However, somatic education methods offer the possibility of vastly extending the psychomotor work possible in physical education. More than that, somatic methods can extend the range of work done in physical education by offering powerful and specific tools which link psychomotor work directly to cognitive/affective work.

The inclusion of somatic work in physical education would offer an extended range of teaching, research and employment activities for physical educators. These new possibilities fall into three main areas — enhancement of task performance, wellness education, and adjunctive services in medical and mental health areas — with applications of these general possibilities in a broad variety of specific areas.

Including somatic education in physical education would change how physical educators function in schools and colleges. To begin with, somatic training could be included in the regular sports and fitness activities to help students learn better mental/physical awareness and control of their movements. Of course, any somatic training done to enhance sport skills would carry over into the rest of students' lives. Beyond the physical education activity program, physical educators trained in somatic work could also function as service providers for other departments on campus that could make use of specialized somatic knowledge to support their own missions. Such departments could include computer science, music, industrial design, theater, psychology and so on. Somatic educators could also be of use to student health services both in terms of teaching preventive wellness practices and in terms of offering adjunctive services for treating various medical or psychological conditions.

Similar teaching opportunities would exist in business and industry and for the general public, both in terms of wellness education and in terms of adjunctive services in the medical and mental health fields. Somatic educators could teach either in pre-existing institutions such as hospitals, businesses or factories, or they could offer classes and individual instruction as private practitioners, setting up their own schools.

Embracing somatic education would offer the profession of physical education broad new possibilities. However, in moving to embrace these possibilities, the field of physical education would have to face some questions concerning professional preparation for somatic teaching.

It takes concentrated and lengthy training to achieve competence in the somatic methods. As a general rule, certification programs in somatic education are offered by private institutes that have no connection with academic programs in health, physical education or dance. There are few physical educators who are qualified somatic educators, and it would be important to determine who should teach somatics in physical

education programs and how much training they should have. How would physical educators get the training required to teach somatic techniques? Would the physical education departments welcome people from outside as instructors in the basic activity programs? Would physical education welcome somatic educators as instructors in professional preparation programs?

It would be possible to incorporate somatic education training and certification processes into graduate degree programs if physical education departments were willing to commit the resources to somatic training. It would also be possible to have physical educators acquire somatic qualifications in post-degree training, much as psychotherapists go to specialized institutes after their academic degree work to acquire skills in particular schools of psychotherapy. (This approach would benefit the somatic education institutes as well in that it would bring in students with a solid educational background on which the institutes could build. It would also bring the somatic methods taught by the institutes to new populations and areas of application.) It would also be possible to include somatic work as a normal element of all physical education activity courses so that physical education majors would absorb the skills as part of their ordinary course of instruction. This apprenticeship approach would reduce the time needed in specific professional training.

However, any difficulties there may be in bringing somatic education into the profession of physical education are vastly outweighed by the benefits that will come about by doing so. Somatic education will be a fundamental part of physical education in the twenty-first century, and this broader physical education will have a very important role to play in bringing about a healthier, more peaceful, more productive, and happier world.

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