

The Cognisant Body

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Introduction

To be cognisant is to be aware. It is to have, or show a knowledge of something through understanding, realisation or perception. This awareness is not just mental; it is marked by comprehension through sentient attentiveness and comes when we honour the lived experience of the body as the primary ground for knowing. Through sentient awareness, through a dancing, cognisant body where awareness emanates from the inside out, we become fully informed and conscious. This consciousness allows us to become livelier and more engaged performers, to create kinaesthetically rich dances, and to be teachers who invite students to acknowledge, investigate and incorporate the images, symbols and feelingful aspects of their own physical engagement in performance, choreography and technique. This paper investigates developing and deepening our ability to be truly cognisant dancers, choreographers and artist-teachers.

The discipline has always valued dancers who are spatially aware, who are able to accurately articulate the shape of the body, and who can rhythmically reproduce the timing of the movement. However it is our observation that this value system tends to emphasise superficial ways of knowing and can result in surface level performance. The pedagogical past of studio, university and professional training in modern dance, contemporary dance and ballet, in both technique and choreography, often has been focused on 'do as I'm doing' rather than developing truly cognisant dancers. For example, dancers are frequently asked to attend to the shape of the body (destination focused) as opposed to the

shaping of the body (process focused.) Traditional concert dance pedagogy has placed strong emphasis on visual learning, with demonstration being the primary pedagogy. Dancers in training have generally not been asked to be fully aware of *how* they arrive at their 'destination' nor encouraged to feel the movement from an inner perspective.

We believe that dancers best prepared for today's dance world are those who attend to process *and* product, journey *and* destination in dance performance, choreography and teaching. We consider process to evolve around the internal motivation of the body that leads to an outward movement form; and that product, or outward form, is a manifestation of an inward desire. We value and practise a psychophysical approach to dance teaching, performance, and choreography that is based on the belief that the body knows deeply and intrinsically.

As the body seeks sensation it comes in contact with the world; it desires to make sense of its encounters. In Western thought, all too often thinking, reasoning, imagining, remembering, cognition, understanding and 'sense-making' are associated primarily with mental functions. Ironically, even dancers whose primary form of expression is physical, fall prey to mentally biased cultural paradigms. Through language, theory, and practice dance teachers often reinforce and support dualistic sensibilities that relegate the kinaesthetic to a secondary position. An obvious example is the traditional use of mirrors in dance class to 'see' the desired/correct shape of the body rather than feel through inner connectivity the relationship of the parts to the whole. Likewise, there seems to be a preference for experiencing dance from the head down, from the mind to the body, rather than from cellular sensing. This kind of dualism doesn't serve the profession. 'Dualism,' as Sandra Fraleigh (2002, p. 58), who writes about dance from a phenomenological point of view states, 'is a matter consciousness' and by returning to the 'sensory level' where 'our self is organically whole' we gain access to 'a participatory landscape of unwritten languages waiting to speak our stories in the quiet air of dreams and dancing'. Artistry springs from such evocative experiences. To honour the cognisant, dancing body, the aware, knowing body, clearly has implications for dance pedagogy.

Postmodernism in dance has created a place, even a need for the cognisant dancer. Dancers, who in previous generations may have been seen to be vehicles for an individual choreographer's vision are now asked to bring their own experience and presence to the work. Today's dancers are required to have a highly honed physical and mental facility; they are required to be aware and to *think* with their bodies and their minds. Ian Burkitt's writing locates such thinking and awareness in the body. '...Thinking involves a body engaged in spatial and temporal activity... a body that is always thinking in the sense that it is aware of its location, its movements, and the things it is seeing or hearing' (Burkitt, 1998, p. 74). As practitioners of dance we see tremendous value in developing dancers/choreographers/artist-teachers who can link awareness and action through inner knowing. In this paper, using Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) as a

framework, we explore how somatic reflective processing, that honours both the body and the mind as capable of knowing, is key to creating cognisant dancers.

The mind in the body and the body in the mind – kinaesthetic knowing

In spite of the fact that many would claim that the mind is the governing force of our being, in reality mental functions, emotions and bodily experience are in a constant, delicate and nuanced dance of relationship and mutual influence. It is through the front line of the body, though, that knowledge is created and confirmed. The body knows. It is aware, it perceives, it processes, sorts through incoming stimuli, filters it and makes judgments on what course of action it should take. 'We do not simply inhabit our bodies; we literally use them to think with' (Seitz, 2000, p. 23). Maggi Phillips reinforces this by commenting that '[i]ntra and inter disciplinary approaches to dance suggest that the physical body may be situated at the centre of 'knowing,' thereby challenging the privileged position of the word in Western scholarship...' (Phillips, 2003, p. 1).

Pertinent to this discussion is the fact that there are ways of knowing and understanding the world and our relation to it that are not automatically processed through the brain. 'The boundaries between perception, action, and cognition are porous' says Seitz (2000, p. 35). And Burkitt, who builds a case for this using the work of Merleau-Ponty, says that it is through bodily actions, through context, through what he says are 'non-cognitive forms of categorisation' that thought is made possible (1998, p. 68). 'Knowledge', he says, (and we would add awareness) 'is embodied and situated [and] the product of having an active body.' It is bodily actions or habits which make thought possible (Seitz, 2000). Perhaps Burkitt's phrase 'non-cognitive forms of categorisation' might be re-phrased as 'super-cognitive forms of categorisation' if indeed cognition and being cognisant are linked and thinking is 'embodied and situated.' Considering a Body Mind Centering perspective, Linda Hartley (1994, p. xxvii-xxviii) reinforces this in *Wisdom of the Body Moving* when she makes the distinction between 'mind' as information gained through mental and cognitive processes and 'mind' as a '...function of awareness that can move among, encompass, and pervade all processes and contents of cognition'.

If then the body 'knows', it is not necessary to wait for cognitive thought to confirm what is already felt and understood kinaesthetically before we act on our awareness. Fraleigh (2000, p. 57) states that, '[o]ur body thinks, and it thinks as it moves.' In other words, our moving, living body is intelligent, and our thinking arises through material physical sources as surely as it may seem to move beyond them. When we trust our innate intelligence (Fraleigh is referring to our kinaesthetic intelligence), it speaks, or brings us images and feelings in unpredictable ways. If dancers truly focused, as Phillips (2003, p. 1) suggests, on the 'imaginative flesh of complex physical thought', our dances and our dancing would be rich beyond words.

For us, kinaesthetic thinking as a non-cognitive form of categorisation is at the centre of 'orchestrating a sequence of activities; integrating intellectual, emotional and multi-sensory experience; and selecting and executing appropriate movement, action or activity' (Seitz, 2000, p. 35). It is at the centre of meaning making. As such, our suggestion is to dive deeply, quickly, to access preconscious or subterranean kinaesthetic sensations. It is here, in the *terra firma* of the body, where meaning resides, especially when one connects sensation and awareness to meta-themes – Inner/Outer, Function/Expression, Stability/Mobility and Exertion/Recuperation – that are contained in human body organisation and psychophysical patterning. We have found that kinaesthetic thinking is at the core of Bartenieff Fundamentals (BF) and LMA and is why we find the LMA system to be effective in helping dancers access deep inner knowing.

For example, potential for meaning-making becomes apparent as dancers explore concepts that are imbedded in the LMA Patterns of Total Body Connectivity (PTBC). These hardwired developmental patterns underlie all human movement and function without conscious awareness. However, when we consciously attend to the presence and power of these patterns of body connectivity we are able to simultaneously experience and perceive sensation and find meaning of movement. This embodied awareness can expand both technical abilities and performance capabilities. For instance, knowing that Breath is about wholeness and unity allows us indulge more fully in the completeness of our own sensation and to trust our sense of being. This wholeness supports the individual voice of artistry. The pattern of Core/Distal functions, whether the mover is aware of it or not, is a ground for understanding our relationship with the world. Magnify through awareness the feeling of reaching out and coming back in, tracking our sensation of this action, and it becomes apparent that the body knows, without having to verify through conscious thought, the alive and ongoing desire of the body to reach to find connection and to ground for stability. Within the bodily experience of Core/Distal, we feel and simultaneously know what Mobility and Stability are about; we fly, we fall, we recuperate, we stretch outward and draw inward. These concepts don't have to be processed through the mind for understanding; the body is, to rephrase Phillips, the manifestation of 'complex physical thought.'

At a cellular level, at a structural level, there are innate physical/psychological concepts that are the baseline for making sense of the world. If we know that they are there, if in our teaching we attend to them and reinforce them as patterns that undergird all human movement, our students and we, will be able to deepen our embodied knowing. This is where the immediacy of dance as an art form resides. We don't have to 'mediate' what we experience kinaesthetically through conscious thought. Intuitively – through sensation – understanding and meaning are there. We just have to trust, from the inside out, what the body is telling us, what the body is teaching us. An inside-out approach has significant implications for teaching and learning in dance.

Linking inner knowing to outward action through practice – the knowing body

Likely we have all heard the time-honored platitude ‘practice makes perfect.’ We’ve been admonished to practise our scales on the piano, to practise our pliés, practise the choreography or technique combination outside of class, practise whatever we want to improve our ability to do. Practise, practise, practise: it sounds simple with one’s effort invariably resulting in a desired outcome. However, practise is not practice, is not practice. The following questions come to mind: What does it mean to practise? Practise what? And perhaps the most important question, ‘How to practise?’

In *Free Play – Improvisation in Life and Art*, Stephen Nachmanovitch (1994, p. 73) writes about practice that comes from a deep place; such practise is neither passive nor uninformed. ‘Practice’ he says, ‘is...the linkage of inner knowing and action.’ While traditionally practice in dance has focused on ‘the material,’ Nachmanovitch suggests a practice that is deeply intentional and focused on connecting inner knowing to outward action. It is our experience that through incorporating somatic approaches, which honour inner knowing, our pedagogies can help students achieve fully three-dimensional physicality and learn to trust their inner sources for grounding, being and creating.

Looking historically at the use of practice in the study of Western concert dance, sustained focus on inner knowing is noticeably absent. Rather than a deep linkage of inner knowing and outward action, practice has been seen as more of a drill or a discipline through repetition. When considered superficially, practice is about repetition and replication. It’s about doing. But the body can ‘do’ things without an awareness of what’s transpiring. We can ‘do’ without really being engaged. We have all experienced this. No one would argue that this kind of practice does not offer a certain return in terms of patterning motor neurons for a desired result. However, practice with clear intentionality has the potential to yield deep cellular understanding of the expressive nature of movement. As teachers of dance we have the opportunity to help students move to a deeper level of sentient practice by, as Fraleigh (2000, p. 57) says, ‘[p]aying attention to the somatosensory’.

It is telling perhaps that in dance, the word practice is most frequently used as a verb, as in we ‘go to practise’ or we practise our technical skills in class. By way of contrast, yoga offers a way to examine practice as a noun, as a discipline. In yoga, it is ‘the practice,’ ‘your practice’ that both informs and transforms, not mindless repetition. To consider practice in this way significantly shifts our perspective. At the beginning of a recent yoga class, the instructor invited the group to come to their ‘practice’ with a sentient awareness that required attention beyond shape and position in space. Each repetition offered an opportunity to dive more deeply into the psychophysical understanding that comes with attention to the inner connectivity and outer expressivity inherent in each of the postures, as well as the transitions between postures. This same kind of attention can be

applied to a technique class that is so directed. It is a way of being in the world that engages all aspects of the practitioner.

Relative to traditional university studio programs, with their specialised vocabularies and techniques, the question can be asked whether or not dancers are invited, through their practice, to link, as Nachmanovitch suggests, 'inner knowing and action.' It is our observation, having experienced traditional pedagogical approaches as students, and having taught for more than 30 years in university settings, that inner knowing does not receive nearly as much attention as outward action. We suggest that by attending to inner knowing through pedagogy informed by somatic understanding, dance artist-educators can help students discover more effective, efficient and expressive outward action. The deep support provided by inner knowing transforms action into artistry.

The framework of LMA has opened for us many avenues for helping students connect inner sensation with outward expression. LMA trains us to sense, to see, to be aware of the parts and pieces within the context of a whole. And the theory is mediated through practising, through deep attention to the connection between inner sensation and outward expression. To demonstrate the way in which LMA/BF moves theory in to practice while acknowledging kinaesthetic knowing, take for example the concept of Grounding, a fundamental principle in the study of technique. The teacher might approach it from the 'Body' aspect by exploring the Upper-Lower Pattern of Total Body Connectivity including the foot-to-pelvis connection and kinetic chains that facilitate connectedness to the earth. Psychological implications of 'taking a stand', or 'standing on one's feet' also come into play. Exploring 'Strong Weight Effort' and 'Free Flow', supports moving through space with ease and power. Investigating 'Spatial Intent' informs the clarity of both 'Vertical Throughness' for standing and propulsion in traveling. Considering how the body accommodates and adapts its 'Shape' in the process of traveling clarifies the shaping of the body and the relationship to self and or the environment. Within the LMA framework, all of these explorations are mediated through a felt sense, trusting inner sensation as a primary means of knowing and understanding.

To encourage a fuller intentionality in performance, we encourage dancers to attend to not only what they are doing, but to how they are doing it. Through an awareness of how something is done, dancers learn to focus on the dynamics of the movement. How the action is accomplished colours the dance with an emotional quality that is undeniable. By engaging in the qualitative aspects of the movement, or the 'inner attitude' with which they accomplish the action, dancers develop highly nuanced awareness of how they use weight, time, flow and space. In doing so dancers capture the emotional essence of the choreography. In our experience the clearer the dynamics – in LMA terminology, the 'Effort' life of a dancer – the more expressive, and emotionally charged their performance. For example in coaching a dancer for an awareness of how they activate their weight to achieve impact, do they use power and strength or does the impression reside

in withholding their weight, creating a feeling of delicacy, of not wanting to disturb anyone? Relative to time, do they move with the quickness of lightning, or do they create suspended time and create a sense of timelessness? Helping our dancers to track the 'feeling-full' sensation of the movement will move them beyond what is being done (the action itself), and closer to performance that transcends the action. By way of an inner knowing and somatosensory processing, dancers will fully embody the intent of the movement.

Somatic understanding can inform choreography as well as performance. Wholeness of bodymindspirit can be a model for aesthetic wholeness in choreography. Take intent as a fundamental concept in choreography. The direction of the work can be understood as a result of adherence to a vision or purpose. Just as all of the parts of the body can be seen to move/perform in relationship to each other to fulfill a particular intent, movement phrases and sections can always be 'checked' against the choreographic intention for internal congruence. If the vision or intent is unclear and ill formed, the resulting structure will lack congruency and focus. If the intent is clear and each part evolves organically out of the original intent, the form will have integrity and power through the resulting connectivity. As it is with body organisation and integration, so it is with choreography.

In order for students to come to trust inner knowing, we have found several approaches to be useful. Here are a few thoughts on pedagogical approaches that support inner trust and knowing:

- Provide students regular opportunities to reflect on how they have come to know what they know.
- Encourage students to tune in to inner sensation, gut feelings, 'listening in the bones.' If there are mirrors in the studio, orient the class so they are not always facing them.
- Provide reinforcement when they make changes based on inner knowing. Honour and celebrate the change process as a life process.
- Provide for them many opportunities to connect inner sensation to outer expression. This includes quiet and deep ways of moving and processing as well as vigorous full-bodied expressions.
- Introduce them to somatic practice early in their dance experience (studio, university or professional) – what the intent of somatics is, how it works, and why it can help them become better dancers and more fully dimensional human beings. Do this explicitly as well as implicitly and use somatic pedagogies across curriculums.
- Give assignments that ask students to utilise somatic approaches. Include reflection and sensory processing as a regular part of both in-class and out-of-class experience.

Conclusion

From experience and sensation, to perception and awareness, to meaning-making to action, moving bodies make sense of the world. Knowing begins in the body; this positions us to consider the world in multiple ways. To understand the world by way of sensation and the perceptions we have of our moving physical selves, is to own, in a primary way, our very being. To be aware through sentient attentiveness, through a dancing, cognisant body is an essential attribute of the 21st century dancer. This kind of awareness makes it possible to mine the lived experience of the body as the ground for knowing. Through awareness and reflective practice we develop ownership, personal voice and expressivity and thereby increase our own potential as artists, performers, choreographers, and teachers. As such, we are prepared to be positive change agents in the world.

We live in a time where mind, verbal language and linear processing are valued over intuitive, sensory immediacy. This way of considering our very existence privileges the mind as the 'knowing' entity and places the body as subservient to it. As dancers, choreographers and artist educators we know that moving bodies are cognisant bodies. We are grounded in processes that value an inner awareness of our sentient experience, we recognise that the body is the very basis of, not a precondition for, thinking [and knowing] (Burkitt, 1998, p. 65). The primacy of this concept leads us to reframe an idea that has guided Western thought and values for centuries, 'I move, therefore I know.' Integrating somatic sensibilities into our curricula offers an alternative to the over-riding Cartesian worldview that permeates our culture.

It is our experience that somatic practices, specifically Laban Movement Analysis, honour and encourage dancers to be cognisant. Unfortunately, somatic approaches such as LMA/BF and associated pedagogies, which nurture awareness and reflective practice, are not yet an integral or widespread part of university teaching practices and curricula. Somatic classes are often separate and distinct from technique and composition both in content and approach. We see tremendous opportunity to deepen, enrich, and integrate dance curricula by utilising somatic approaches across the curriculum.

As a profession we have a challenge and opportunity ahead of us, to honour, more than we presently do, the body as a site for awareness and knowledge. We have a responsibility to make a concerted effort to help our students understand that the body is 'the center of "knowing," rather than mere baggage to the brilliant "dance" of the mind' (Phillips, 2003, p. 4). Dance is perhaps the most sophisticated of the arts because it is in and through moving that the world can be revealed to us. As a 'practice,' as a discipline of, not for, acknowledging sensation, dance is a vital means by which we come to understand the physical, symbolic, cultural and ultimately personal meaning in our movement and by extension in our world. This is what we need to impart to our students.

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Biographical statements

Professor Kathie Debenham PhD, CLMA, Utah Valley University, has developed programs and curricula in university, secondary and primary school settings, and directed companies of children/youth, university, and professional dancers. She has presented the Laban/Bartenieff work at numerous regional, national, and international conferences in dance and in the humanities.

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