

# **Changing Repetition**

**A 'practice as research' study on dialoguing, drawing and dancing**

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## **Context and background**

Veronica Ashcroft and I were colleagues at a centre for adult education based in London, UK. Veronica taught tai chi and I taught yoga and in our professional exchanges over the five years that we worked together we shared our common concern with the role of empathy and lived experience in our teaching. After all, both tai chi and yoga were about existing in *being* as opposed to *doing*, and to be in the moment of lived experience whilst teaching was something we both valued. We began a dialogue; it became a weekly exchange, and we discovered that we both also experienced this sense of *being* in our areas of artistic practice. Veronica was also a life-drawing artist and I also worked as a dance practitioner and university lecturer.

We agreed to meet and merge not only our art forms but also our pedagogical dialogue. This dialogue was to emerge spontaneously as we were drawing and dancing. As an experiment, I was interested in the relationship between my attention and intention whilst moving and I wanted to explore this through movement repetition. Veronica was keen to discover what was involved in drawing a person in the act of moving. Thus we approached our project with several aims. The first was to continue our discussion about the issues of empathy and lived experience in our teaching; the second was to explore our respective interests of intention/attention and the capturing of physical form/feeling of the moving body in the medium of fine art.

What this paper articulates therefore are reflections on the project, delivered in a split tone, which attempts to capture both the free conversational nature present in the immediacy of the project and the more theoretical strands, drawn together at the end of the project. These theoretical strands have been contextualised within the area of phenomenology. In this way, the ground covered by way of conclusions on the project draws together notions of bodily knowledge, kinaesthetic empathy and intersubjectivity. As phenomenology

values the non-dualistic perspective of mind and body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962 and 1964), even in cases where division appears to be drawn dualistically between movement and meaning, attention and intention, and form and feeling, it is not my position that they be viewed as such here. Language forces a false perception of dualism between terms but it is not a reflection of my stance. Issues concerning dualism and non-dualism exceed the scope of this paper. Nevertheless it is worth highlighting that the attention/intention relationship was a main concern of mine in this study and that likewise the form/feeling relationship was a concern of Veronica's. Through our shared experience of kinaesthetic empathy and intersubjectivity, we grappled in shedding light on our concerns.

### **Dialoguing with Veronica**

In my first meeting with Veronica, I stood in the centre of the studio floor facing her while she sat poised over a large piece of paper in one corner, with ink and brush. The following notes provide an example of the relationship between attention and intention.

Right arm lifts up, across, around and down  
Right leg lifts  
Left arm moves up, over, across

Right arm lifts up, across, around and down  
Right leg lifts  
Left arm moves up, over, across

As I dance this repetitive sequence of movements, my mind wanders. I think about what a rainy summer we've had and how on the first sunny day in what seems like ages, I am spending it inside dancing. But Veronica jolts me out of these wandering weather thoughts and asks: 'What are you thinking about now?' I lie. I don't want to appear disinterested in the very task I have set up. 'I'm thinking about that hand thing again...when one part of the body stays still and the other parts move around it.' Veronica seems pleased that I've re-introduced this earlier topic of conversation and we chat on whilst I keep the repeated sequence of movement going.

### **Intention and attention**

The idea of repeating movement was a springboard for this collaborative project between a fine artist and dancer, both of whom are also teachers. Repetition of movement was used to gather information about the dancer's shifting intention and attention in the process of moving. In my experience of dancing, intention and attention are overlapping experiences. Intention denotes an act, which is will-based,<sup>1</sup> where there is a motive to produce an action. Baddeley (1995, p. xiii), a psychologist interested in exploring levels of attention, defines attention as 'concentration on a particular source of stimulation.'<sup>2</sup> It is within the overlapping nature of intention and attention where a link between the two is revealed. If the two were unrelated, how could I intend toward something without also giving it my attention? During the experience of dancing, something takes my attention and I intend towards it, or I direct my intention towards something whilst giving it my attention; yet

these are not hard and fast positions. As Baddeley highlights, states of divided attention come into play; and my state of attention as I carried out the repetitive movement sequence was hence no exception to Baddeley's suggestion that attention shifts.

I believe it is the workings of these shifts in attention that has an influence on how we interpret what we experience. An example of this is evident in the video recording of English stand-up comedian Eddie Izzard's show *Glorious* (1997). In this show, Izzard circles his hands one around the other, imitating the movement of running his hands under the tap. A few moments later he repeats the movement and tells his audience, 'I'm not using the taps, I'm letting a mouse run over my hands!' (Richardson, 1997). We see both scenarios, even though the movement hasn't fundamentally changed. I say 'fundamentally' because the movement, although consisting of the same vocabulary, alters in the way it is performed as a direct result of the placement of Izzard's attention. Therefore Izzard's intention works in tandem with his vocalised descriptions.

Similarly, Trisha Brown, a founding member of the experimental dance group Judson Dance Theater, primarily recognised for its subversive performance work in the 1960s and 1970s said, that although she tried to make the movement the same each time she performed her work *Accumulation* (1971) she realised that the actions performed were never the same. 'Sometimes I go a bit faster, sometimes I slow down, and those changes I don't consciously make. It happens' (Brown in Burt, 1974, p. 21). But why does this happen?

I propose that attention and repetition of movement must work like a feedback loop, each influencing the other. The idea of a feedback loop was explored in this project using spontaneous verbal dialogue between the artist and the dancer as a barometer for expressing shifts in attention, albeit, as I have already confessed, in verbal dialogue one could bend the truth about one's placement of attention. However, the movement of the human body can also reveal the inner intentions of the individual and according to some people, such as modern dance pioneer Martha Graham, movement does not lie.<sup>3</sup> 'I refuse to admit that the dance has limitations that prevent its acceptance and understanding...the reality of dance is its truth to our inner life' (Graham in Brown, 1979, p. 52). Movement analyst Eden Davies (2001, p. 14) speaks similarly: 'The inner attitude of the person moving would give movement its dynamism.' A larger debate than can be addressed in this paper is opened up here in relation to intention and interpretation. It is worth noting that although both Graham and Davies lend support to the non-dualist stance of mind and body, a controversy is revealed when the example of dishonest dialogue accompanies movement. If one's attention was evidence of 'truth to our inner life' as Graham stated (in Brown 1979, p. 45), then how might it be possible to monitor shifts in attention? I looked to repetition of movement as one option for experimentation.

### **Variations in movement**

So how do the inner shifts of attention (or what may be traditionally perceived as actions of the mind) manifest in the movements of the human body? Even

though repetition of movement was something that I wanted to address in the project, Veronica's process of drawing me dancing highlighted a fracture in the success of a repeated movement phrase to reveal shifts in my attention. As we continued the dialogue, Veronica suggested that I abandon my set phrase of repeated movement and try improvising. Although initially hesitant, once I tried this idea, shifts in attention when working with improvised movement produced greater variations in my movement vocabulary.

Repeated movement proved impossible anyway. Movement repeated without change could arguably only be mechanistic since human movement alters continually as a result of our body-mind construct. According to Deane Juhan (2003. p. 390), a bodyworker who promotes the functionally integrated body-mind, it is our corporeality, which dictates our interface with decision-making processes.

The body is the immediate precinct in which the early formative stages of perceptions unfold, so our current experiences of our bodies influence in decisive ways many of the qualities of the world that is finally deposited into conscious awareness.

The execution of movement over time reveals variations in the movement vocabulary, and shifts in my attention have to manifest within the framework of the movement vocabulary already in place. Conversely, an improvised phrase of movement reveals more dramatic shifts in my attention as a result of decision-making processes to purposely change the movement vocabulary.

### **Form or feeling**

As I explored my shifts in attention between working with improvised and set movement material, Veronica told me she had been experiencing a dilemma while drawing me dancing. This dilemma was centred on her choice to draw either physical form or energetic/emotional feeling. When I danced my set repeated movement phrase, Veronica focused on capturing my physical form. These drawings manifested as still images inspired by physical shapes in fleeting moments of stillness. As she grappled with her dilemma, she continued to talk to me about the artist Degas and described how he used to have his dancer models pose in stillness at the ballet barre for hours. In response to her comments, I replied that I was much happier moving. We both agreed that a still image representation of one physical shape fell short of capturing the actual experience of dancing. Veronica then did some drawings with the aim of capturing the energetic/emotional feeling contained within my repeated phrase of movement as it was being danced. This manifested on paper in a much more abstract way: big sweeping brush strokes layered with abandon onto the paper.

After a few free-form drawings of this abstract nature, Veronica wanted to see if it was possible to capture form and feeling simultaneously. In a collaborative effort to do this we decided it would be best for me to improvise movement material. Veronica suggested I keep one part of my body still and let the other parts move around it. In this way, she could draw the still part of my body as form and look at the other parts for information about feeling and energy. At

first, I resisted letting go of my comfortable and repetitive movement phrase. Yet, as I thought more about it I realised that the need to move away from set material and into improvised material was indicative of a shift in our respective attention. Our dialogue had directly affected the movement material and once I'd settled into this idea, I was happy improvising. Improvising movement material provided greater scope for discovering information about my shifting attention because I was pushed out of a set pattern of movement that was contained, both in terms of movement and thought.

Improvisation presses us to extend into, expand beyond, extricate ourselves from that which we know. It encourages us or even forces us to be 'taken by surprise'. Yet we could never accomplish this encounter with the unknown without engaging the known.

(Foster in Cooper Albright & Gere, 2003, p. 4)

### **Bodily knowledge**

'How did you think of making that movement?' Veronica asks at a particular moment. 'I think I've always moved like this,' I reply. I surely learned a similar movement pattern in a dance class somewhere in the history of my dance training and now, having done it for so long, it feels like second nature. According to evidence from modern science, we have 'body knowledges'; memories of movement that emerge from repetition of motion. In the field of kinesiology this is referred to as 'muscle memory' (Fitt, 1988).

Trisha Brown (in Burt, 2006, p. 147) recounts a profound experience of bodily memory that occurred while performing her work *Accumulation with Talking plus Watermotor* (1979). The choreographic structure of the work allows her to speak through a spontaneous stream of consciousness whilst dancing. During one moment in the performance, Brown says: 'My father died in between the making of this move and this move'. In a later discussion, Brown revealed: 'I was amazed that my body had stored this memory in the movement pattern...I became silent and composed myself. I was devastated that I had said that' (ibid).

It is not my opinion that 'body knowledge' comes about from a regimen of repetition that is automatic in its nature but rather, that the knowledge of the trained body is manifested in its ability to alter, navigate and negotiate dancing in a way that is responsive to shifting conditions of the lived moment without reference to cerebral or intellectual processes. The limits of this paper prevent me from elaborating on the scientific explanations for this but to put it simply, muscle memory works in relation to the neural signal that is sent from the brain to our muscles to enable action.<sup>4</sup>

French philosopher, Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) refers to this bodily knowledge as movement, which resides in one's 'habit body'. When a movement becomes habitual (for example, the movement involved in tying one's shoe) the mind can be free to think, speak, sing or perform other tasks whilst the body is in the process of carrying out the habitual movement.<sup>5</sup> However, in order for a movement to become habitual, it needs to have been repeated. When we first learned to tie our shoes, it was a highly concentrated

task. It demanded a certain degree of motor control, a certain amount of precision in timing. Once tying a shoe became a habitual movement (i.e. we no longer focused on how the sensory-motor system was operating), our mind could occupy itself with other thoughts. Practices like meditation aim to discourage this free running of the mind and advocate mindfulness to each and every moment. In the area of dance, the process of technical training is saturated with attention to the sensory-motor system. However, mindfulness of the sensory-motor system is merely one place to direct attention. The collaboration of the teacher-artists in this study revealed how our own placing of attention on an enquiry into attention/intention and form/feeling served to highlight rewarding pedagogical implications. The relevance of these implications only came into being once Veronica and I embarked upon the idea of reversing our roles within the study.

### **Role reversal and intersubjectivity**

Veronica asks me if I'd like to try my hand at drawing. I take up a big beautiful bamboo-handled brush and Veronica pours me some black ink into a dish. Veronica's body too has a storehouse of knowledge. She is both a teacher and practitioner of tai chi and she moves with fluidity and calm. Veronica selects a series of movements from her tai chi practice and repeats them for me. Brush poised in hand and suddenly overwhelmed, I now understand how she was faced with the dilemma of *what* to draw. There is so much here: the form of her body, the grace of the movement, my own feelings of awe and voyeurism...I try to focus my attention, thinking of just form and feeling and attempt to leap into the process where we left it, drawing a bit of both. 'This drawing business is harder than it looks,' I tell her. A few sweeping strokes go down on the paper. I am completely unfamiliar with how to wield this object in order to convey what sensations I am experiencing as a result of watching Veronica move. Is this perhaps because, unlike Veronica, I cannot use the brush as an extension of myself? I do not have the body knowledge to confidently 'move myself' through the brush as an object. Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 144) provides a poignant example:

I sit at my typewriter; a motor space opens up beneath my hands, in which I am about to 'play' what I have read. ...the whole question is how a certain physiognomy of 'visual' patterns can evoke a certain type of motor response, how each 'visual' structure eventually provides itself with its mobile essence without there being any need to spell the word or specify the movement in detail in order to translate one into the other.

Can this also apply to drawing dancing? I make some sweeping brush strokes across the paper because of the visual patterns, which I see Veronica make. There must be some information in Veronica's movement, which my body understands and can translate through the movement of the brush. Perhaps if I worked with the brush over a substantial period of time the strokes might just flow like Veronica's movement and there would be no hesitation before making a mark on the paper. As Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 143) puts it:

The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight.

The brush is just an object for me; yet, like the blind man's stick that has become completely infiltrated into his bodily knowledge, so has the pen or charcoal or brush become embodied for the fine artist.

The experience of this role reversal highlighted that the relationship between Veronica and I was in fact an intersubjective one. The work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who, like Merleau-Ponty, is a phenomenologist, claimed that 'Intersubjectivity employed a conception of *empathy* with others, the manner I am able to read into another's actions, as an expression of inner states analogous to my own' (Moran, 2000, p. 175)<sup>6</sup>. Beyond just watching Veronica's movements and attempting to translate them into a two-dimensional representation on paper, there was a shared feeling, a stirring inside of my own body as I watched Veronica move. This feeling of empathy, lying inherent in our intersubjective relationship, constituted a strong inter-relationship between emotion and action (Gallese, 2003, p. 524).

Empathy has become an area of interest in some areas of dance practice today, possibly because it carries both these characteristics of emotion and action. Carol Lynn Moore (1988, p. 53), a movement analyst based in the UK describes 'kinaesthetic empathy'<sup>7</sup> as a 'physical identification with the movement one observes being executed.' This definition implies that experiences of kinaesthetic empathy occur because of the understanding of one's own being in relationship to the being of another. In other words, therein lies the possibility that as I watch Veronica move, I understand, through the filter of my own body knowledge, what it is Veronica feels. Nathan Stucky (in Stucky and Wimmer, 2002, p. 178), a professor in performance studies at Southern Illinois University, USA claims that:

The phrase 'performance as a way of knowing' points toward this process by implicating the body as a site of knowledge. Performance as a way of knowing means developing 'felt knowledge', a kind of insight unique to the performer.

Artistic collaboration, located at the hub of this project, revealed an intersubjective relationship between Veronica and me, of which kinaesthetic empathy was a part. Moreover, it worked in tandem with the idea of body knowledges.

### **Pedagogical implications**

I have only touched upon the vast subject of body knowledges in this paper, yet I believe this study offers a way of looking at how shifting attention and intention affect the intersubjective nature of a dynamic artistic collaboration. 'Kinaesthetic empathy between researchers and subjects can best illuminate the experiential complexities of human interaction, the texture of a living moment' (Pineau in Stucky & Wimmer, 2002, p. 47). But how does this opinion of Pineau's fare in the light of pedagogy? It has been my experience

as a teacher-artist that problems arise when intangible terms such as 'kinaesthetic empathy' and 'living moment' are brought up alongside the topic of pedagogy. Orthodox pedagogues may even question whether 'experiential complexities of human interaction' (ibid) and intersubjective relations are valid in the context of pedagogical research.

As teacher-artists, the unfolding of our collaborative project very much relied on our spontaneity, body knowledges, lived and shared experiences. I would argue that our approach to this project was not dissimilar from the approaches we employ whilst teaching. When teaching, I rely on kinaesthetic empathy as an indicator of how my students are coping in class; I sense the energy levels of my students in order to discern when and how to alter the pace of a class. Without a commitment to non-verbal cues, felt experience, and intersubjective relationships between my students and me, the quality of my teaching would suffer. Veronica and I have often shared sentiments regarding our dissatisfaction of having to mark the 'performance' of our yoga and tai chi students. Ellsworth (2004, p. 35), in her text, *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture and Pedagogy*, appears to sympathise with this concern:

The only material evidence we have of what makes a curriculum or pedagogy 'educational' is that lived experience... when we look at test scores or curriculum content, we are looking at only one dimension of the reality of learning. The other dimension of learning's reality – its nondecomposable continuity of movement and sensation, its felt reality of the relation that is experience couched in matter – is as real as test scores or curriculum content.

Issuing a mark for 'performance'<sup>8</sup> for areas of study such as movement improvisation, yoga, tai chi and other somatic practices, has been the topic of much debate in many institutions in which I have worked. However, there may be a shift occurring toward an increase in the value of investigatory processes which look to unpick lived experience in teaching and learning. Guy Claxton, Professor of Learning Sciences at the University of Winchester, UK is one example. He writes:

Teachers are able to collaborate with students in creating environments conducive to transformative teaching/learning if they attempt to understand their lived experiences, knowledge and feelings. Doing so will help reveal the complexities of students' cognitive and emotional development.  
(2002, p. 53)

It is my hope that practice as research, as it continues to emerge from teacher-artist collaborations, starts to infiltrate pedagogy with its regard for lived experience and human relationships. Relationships after all, provide us with insight about ourselves. As Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 456) says: 'Man is but a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him.'



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This definition of intention is borrowed from the area of choreological studies and further highlights that intention is a corporeal experience; whereas the concept of intentionality used in schools of philosophical thought (primarily phenomenology) explain it metaphorically in terms of the way our experience can be coloured.

<sup>2</sup> Attention shifts uniquely for everyone. Carl Jung (1964, pp. 58-66) examined these shifts in attention and identified them as four psychic functions: thought, feeling, sensation and intuition, and claimed that each individual holds a preference for one of the four functions at any given time.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Argyle, in his book *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour* (1987) argues how one can learn how to move in such a way that will communicate a message contrary to what one is actually feeling. In essence, he makes a case for how movement *can* lie.

<sup>4</sup> Sally Fitt in her book *Dance Kinesiology* (1988) gives a good explanation of muscle memory.

<sup>5</sup> It is the fault of language that there is an implied duality between mind and body by the use of the phrases 'habit body' and 'body knowledges'. By no means am I advocating that this is the case.

<sup>6</sup> Edith Stein, a pupil of Husserl, provided the following example: 'I see someone blush and know she feels ashamed of herself; a friend tells me of the loss of his brother and I become aware of his pain' (in Moran, 2000, p. 176). However, it is important to highlight that Stein qualifies the experience of empathy, 'I can live in the other's experience in an intuitive manner but I don't undergo that experience myself in an original fashion' (ibid).

<sup>7</sup> This is a term used in Dance Movement Therapy to describe a skill that can be honed by the dance movement therapist as a means of developing a trusting relationship with the client/patient. See Hervey (2000, p. 18) and Levy (Ed.) (1995, p. 13). In earlier dance literature, the dance critic John Martin speaks about *kinaesthetic sympathy* (1935, p. 13) in order to describe the relationship between the dancer's inner intention and the audience's reaction to that intention. See Martin (ibid) and Maletic (1987, p. 159).

<sup>8</sup> See Jon McKenzie's book *Perform or Else* (2001) for rigorous debate around performance, culture and the work place.

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