

Organizing Somatic Exercises

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Central to all somas is “pattern,” or organization, and in particular, *patterned movement*. The terms, “pattern” and “organization,” are abstractions, but you recognize “pattern” as interconnections, how one thing fits into the next and how things affect each other. Good organization shows up as efficient and effective functioning; poor (or random) organization shows up as ineffectual or inefficient functioning. This paper talks about organizing sequences of somatic exercises to bring about higher organization in the person doing them.

Thomas Hanna published a number of somatic exercise programs in written and recorded form around various themes: “Somatic Exercises for Delicate Backs,” “Somatic Exercises for Rounded Shoulders and Depressed Chests,” etc. He organized these programs with recognition for how each somatic exercise prepared the participant for the next, toward a pre-determined goal (i.e., the remedy for the condition named in the title of each program). His selections of somatic exercises were deliberate and specific.

As you conduct somatic exercise classes and workshops, and as you teach a somatic exercise to a client at the end of a clinical session, you seek to select somatic exercises relevant to a central purpose: to enhance somatic functioning. You want your students or clients to feel better put-together at the end than they did at the beginning.

If you did a clinical session, you want the somatic exercise to reinforce the result of the session. How do you make such a selection? You look at the movements developed and choose a somatic exercise that develops awareness and control of those very movements.

An awareness of functional relationships is important, here. There are a number of different kinds of relationships to consider. For simplicity, let’s consider three:

- Agonist/antagonist pairing
- Synergistic relationships
- Variations on a Theme

AGONIST/ANTAGONIST PAIRING

Let’s use an example: the Landau Reaction Lesson (“Lesson 1”).

Lesson 1 in the book, *Somatics*, is about the freeing the posterior musculature and ending habituated movement into extension. The instruction for Lesson 1 starts with Arch & Flatten, which awakens some awareness and control of the relationship between the frontal muscles (flexors of the trunk) and the posterior muscles (extensors) -- antagonists; it proceeds through movements that awaken awareness and control of the posterior musculature; and it ends with Arch & Curl, a more extravagant form of Arch & Flatten, now engaging the muscles of the chest (flexors) and shoulders (extensors).

The logic of this lesson is:

1. Awaken awareness of the movements to be addressed. ("Arch & Flatten")
2. Address the musculature involved in Landau Reaction deliberately and somewhat vigorously (if gently). (pandicular lifts)
3. Integrate the freed agonists with their antagonists in a new equilibrium. ("Arch & Curl")

The logic of Step 3 is that of the "lock-in" maneuver, familiar to us in clinical sessions.

Note that Steps 1 and 3 involve movements that are decidedly different from those of Step 2; they are complementary and involve the antagonists of the agonists (posterior muscles) addressed in Step 2.

The principle, here, is that to put a person together, better, we teach them to use complementary movements with some recognizable functional relationship to each other – not arbitrary or randomly selected movements. It's a matter of principle.

SYNERGISTIC RELATIONSHIPS

For this example, we might use Lesson 3 from *Somatics*: The Muscles of the Sides of the Trunk.

In this lesson, Thomas Hanna teaches us to do two separate movements that engage the muscles at the sides of the waist and then to combine them:

1. Lifting and lowering the head
2. Lifting and lowering the lower leg
3. Lifting and lowering the head and lower leg, together.

The first movement involves what is "north" of the waist (toward the head); the second movement involves what is "south" of the waist (toward the feet). The lesson involves a fourth step:

4. The Four-Way Reach (in the shape of the letter, "X")

In many people, the "south" has seceded from their somatic union to satisfy their self-protective leanings.

So, the logic of this lesson is:

- A. Awaken awareness of each of the involved parties ("north" and "south").
- B. Get the involved parties to exert control over the same territory (the waist/Mason-Dixon line).
- C. Get the involved parties to take turns in a cooperative action ("The Four-Way Reach"/integration).

Steps 1 and 2 get each of the synergists to function independently ("differentiation"); Step 3 gets them to function together ("integration"); Step 4 gets them to cooperate in a new venture ("synergy").

Let's say more about Step 4; we're talking about synergy:

If you remember, The Four-Way Reach (my name; Hanna never named it) involves lying with legs outstretched and separated, arms straight and "north", so that you assume the shape of the letter, "X". You reach, in turn, as follows:

1. Left arm
2. Right arm
3. Left leg
4. Right leg
5. Left leg, etc. (and then all in reverse)

To reach with the left arm involves the muscles of the left shoulder and neck, causing you to curve slightly right; to reach with the right arm involves the muscles of the right shoulder and neck, causing you to curve slightly left. The result is a side-to-side wiggle. To reach with the left leg involves the muscles of the *right* waist; to reach with the right leg involves the muscles of the *left* waist. The result is a side-to-side wiggle. The sequence of all four movements involves an ongoing side-to-side wiggle, at first induced by the arm movements and then by the leg movements.

Where is all this leading?

It leads to the understanding that different movements can exert a similar influence (in this case, to activate voluntary control of the muscles of the waist), and so enhance learning (in this case, control of side-tilt).

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Thomas Hanna pointed out to his Wave 1 students (I was one) that to learn the same movement in various positions deepened (or accelerated) learning (just as seeing the same object from the slightly different positions of the two eyes produces depth perception). We've seen that principle in the preceding two examples.

Now, let's enlarge the picture. Let's consider an *organized sequence* of somatic exercises.

In the book, *Somatics*, Thomas Hanna presented eight lessons. A fun analysis reveals something interesting: a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Lesson 1 is about the back of the body.

Lesson 2 is about the front of the body.

Lesson 3 is about the sides of the body.

Front, back sides. So far, so good. You see how he has addressed three basic aspects of a soma?

There are two more aspects:

- Toward the head (or "north") and toward the feet (or "south")
(I reserve "up" for "away from Earth" and "down" for "toward Earth".)
- Expansion and contraction

To address "north" and "south," Thomas Hanna did something very clever: he used twisting movements at three levels in a progression:

Lesson 4 is about twisting along one axis: the longitudinal axis at the hip joints and waist.

Lesson 5 is about twisting along two axes: the front-to-back axes through the hip joints and longitudinal axis through the waist.

Lesson 6 is about twisting through three axes: the hip joints, shoulders, and neck along all three axes: front to back, side-to-side, and longitudinal.

Do you see how each lesson addressed the twisting movement at a complementary level? They used different ways to accomplish the same end: to teach the movement of twisting, thereby enabling people to fulfill the teaching of Chubby Checker! (a musical somatic educator who preceded Thomas Hanna, and whose teaching was, "C'mon baby! Let's do the twist!")

To address expansion and contraction, Thomas Hanna taught how to free breathing, deliberately using both inhalation and exhalation in patterned movements and various positions: Lesson 7.

Lastly, having differentiated and increased freedom in all aspects of movement, he taught an integration lesson: walking (Lesson 8).

Here's the point: the book, *Somatics*, contains an organized (and organizing) sequence of movements in eight lessons, a selection of movements accessible by most people, but not, of course, the only selection of movements that would have fulfilled Thomas Hanna's purpose. He could have (and we can) choose other movements that integrate agonists and antagonists, that combine synergistically, and that teach variations on a theme – in short, that combine to bring people to a higher level of organization. (That is, in fact, the logic of how I organize my programs, visible in its simplest form in, "The Five-Pointed Star, or The Four Universal Human Movements.")

As you organize your classes and workshops, may I suggest that you follow the same logic. But don't take my word for it: test my words. In your own personal practice of somatic exercises, choose a sequence of exercises to address your front, back, sides, twisting, and expansion/contraction, and see if, by doing so, you feel unusually well put-together. For contrast, deliberately *leave out* movements that balance agonists and antagonists, or leave out synergistic movements, and feel the result. You know what I would predict; let's see if you agree.

A MORE ADVANCED OPTION

When you've got some proficiency assembling sequences of somatic exercises along the logic of "front, back, sides, twisting, expansion/contraction", you have the foundation to recognize complementary somatic exercises, and to assemble *related* somatic exercises in sequences that address specific functional disorders by bringing about a higher level of functional organization. Here's a little clue: The order of the exercises makes a difference; if you can't tell how the order makes a difference, you haven't yet understood the exercises and their effects well enough. Practice them (that specific set of exercises) more; make their effects vivid in you. Experiment with different sequences *of the same exercises*. Feel how they fit together.

You'll know you've succeeded at developing an organized sequence by the result: Good organization shows up as efficient and effective functioning (and feels better).

If you want an experience of what I'm talking about, experiment with one of my recorded programs. (If you've been to Convention when I presented, you have had such an experience.) If you'd like to discuss this topic with me, write or give me a call.

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