

Somatic Exercises: To Demonstrate or Not?

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It has come to my attention that the current training in the practice of teaching somatic exercises eschews demonstrations of the exercises in favor of strictly verbal instruction. I don't know how prevalent this view is, but I think that this development of teaching methodology is an inefficient teaching strategy based on an outdated premise or even a gap in understanding of how people learn. This paper is an opinion piece in which I tell you why I think so.

To get down to it, to reduce teaching to strictly verbal instruction reduces it to the level of recorded instruction, and recorded instruction leaves all kinds of room for people to do the somatic exercises wrongly – or, let's say, "less effectively."

Before I move on, therefore, I have to address the argument that some people may have that there is no "right" way to do somatic exercises, that people have their individual differences and their individual processes. I agree with their assertion as far as it goes, but I say the argument doesn't go far enough.

Learning occurs by a series of approximations, first crude approximations and then successively refined approximations. People's crude approximations differ according to their individual differences and their individual processes. As learning progresses, the differences among individuals become less and less.

Each somatic exercise has a form or pattern that invokes its unique benefits. In his book, *Somatics*, Thomas Hanna told the reader both what movements to do and where to feel the sensations of movement; he also showed the movements in pictures. There are specific instructions and those instructions have specific meanings. "Lift your arm" has a different meaning from "lift your shoulder" – but often, a person given one instruction will perform the act meant by the other instruction.

The job of a good teacher is to assist students in moving from crude approximations to refined approximations as quickly as possible.

A competent and diligent teacher will not get the error go uncorrected, for long. There is no virtue in doing so, as people can go on making the same errors indefinitely, if not corrected.

IDENTIFYING THE RATIONALES

I have been able to identify two rationales for this development of teaching strategy:

- “Find Your Own Way”
- “Avoid Merely Visual Imitation”

“Find Your Own Way”

“Find Your Own Way” is a vestige of the previous generation of somatic education: Feldenkrais Functional Integration. Feldenkrais Functional Integration was viewed more as a sensory-motor enrichment technique than a clinical approach, although it has found itself into clinical settings and Feldenkrais, himself, took on difficult cases. Exploration was and is its primary spirit; its primary concern, like that of its predecessor, The Alexander Technique, is to outgrow or outlearn habitual action patterns. Since it’s all too easy (and far more likely) to see someone demonstrate an action pattern and then, in attempting to duplicate it, to perfunctorily carry ones habituated movement patterns into it (than to do it as seen), demonstration is considered less desirable than fresh exploration.

Hanna Somatic Education is specifically intended as clinical somatic education, with all the intentionality and immediacy that a clinical approach requires. Intentional change is its primary spirit, as evident in the pandicular method that is its primary technique. Hanna somatic exercises are largely pandicular in nature; the likelihood of habituated action patterns persisting through repetitions of pandiculation decreases with practice (provided the practice is done with feeling-attention, rather than perfunctorily). Also, we commonly teach somatic exercises after sessions of assisted pandiculation, when habituated action patterns have been dissolved. We need not be so pusillanimous in our teaching methods.

“Find your own way” has value up to a point; as learning from the inside, out, the learning can go deeper – assuming the person finds their way and doesn’t get bogged in the unconscious backwaters of error. It’s also the necessary approach when developing new somatic exercises or developing a solution for a client. However, for students of somatic exercises, there is a point beyond which “Find your own way.” becomes a time-waster and a disservice to the student. *That’s why there are teachers.*

To learn somatic exercises involves, at best, a challenge for people who are sensory-motor amnesic (function lost) or sensory-motor oblivious (function never developed). Even with instruction, the process is much a “find your own way” one; it involves converting instruction heard and seen into kinesthetic experience. That kinesthetic experience doesn’t emerge into a person full-blown, but develops progressively with repetition. A cursory, mentally-held knowing of a set of instructions or seeing a demonstration differ qualitatively from a deeper, kinesthetically remembered knowing.

The "Find your own way" argument -- that students of somatic exercises shouldn't see them demonstrated because they'll just perfunctorily imitate what they've been shown -- leads straight to the argument that they shouldn't be coached hands-on, either.

I say, they'll have enough of a time finding their way from your verbal instructions, demonstrations, and hands-on coaching to the felt experience to which you are guiding them. They'll still have to move from crude approximation to refined action and from sensory-motor amnesia/obliviousness to sensory-motor awareness/competence. No need to make things more difficult; the leap is great enough.

In case you are concerned that your students may force the movements to match you, or that they'll feel bad because they can't match your demonstrated mobility, I have some ideas to offer: 1) Teach always to work within the comfort zone, stopping short of any action that requires one to repress or ignore cringing. 2) Somatic exercises are not a form of competition or performance. 3) How people do somatic exercises is how they do their lives. Do they hurt themselves by forcing too far past their realistic capabilities? There's a valuable lesson in that: put more care and less force into action. 4) We do well to accept realistic recognition of our limitations and relax concern about how we compare to others, to work to grow from there. This is known as "beginner's mind," always the place from which to do somatic exercises. Take these ideas and formulate them as you will, for the benefit of your students.

Limiting our instruction to verbal guidance reduces our teaching to the level of a recording -- and that (said by someone who sells recordings of verbal instruction -- me) is a disservice when we can do better. I recognize the limitations of recorded instruction; it's better than nothing, when no practitioner is near, but instruction by a competent teacher is always better.

That said, there is a teaching technique of letting people first do their approximation and then showing them (your approximation of) the correct form, so they learn by contrast. After a client performs their approximation and then my "better approximation," I usually have them alternate between their first approximation and my "better approximation" for contrast. To learn by contrast is powerful. I sometimes then invite them to choose which way feels better to them; they almost always choose the more ideal form because it feels better and makes more sense. At other times, I just have them do the better approximation.

“Avoid Merely Visual Imitation”

There are two sayings:

- “A picture is worth a thousand words.”
- “Monkey see, monkey do.”

I don't believe there is such a thing as “merely visual imitation” that doesn't involve changes of brain organization. The discovery by neurophysiologists of so-called “mirror neurons,” which are involved in the empathic replication, within our nervous system, of the feeling states of others we perceive, supports my belief. The brain learns by two pathways: exploration and imitation. We've already dispensed with the rationale that students should be made to learn exclusively by exploration; imitation is by far the most prevalent form of learning. A picture is worth a thousand words; demonstration saves time.

As we know, some people learn best through seeing, others, through hearing, and others, through feeling. To exclude visible demonstration from our teaching methods also deprives visual learners of their preferred method of learning.

Some people may worry that activation of the visual cortex may take away from kinesthetic learning. Consider: Seeing reveals what's there, where it is, and how it's moving. The primary function of seeing is to organize (prepare) a soma for movement in an environment. The link between sight and kinesthesia is primal; they work together when we organize ourselves to take action. Kinesthesia takes over. Imagine holding a lemon wedge with its juicy part facing your mouth. Bite into the juicy part. See?

However, demonstration has a pitfall: If students watch while they are practicing movements, their visual experience distracts from their kinesthetic experience. The same problem exists with teachers who talk continuously during practice, distracting students from their kinesthetic experience.

Now, I have a caution:

Go Beyond Merely Verbal-Mental Learning

With the use of exclusively verbal instruction, a risk exists that some somatic educators may believe that, by knowing the words of instruction, they know the somatic exercise in all its nuances – without even having practiced it, much. I might call this, “Academic Get-by Syndrome,” a common strategy of college students.

As somatic educators, we ought to be careful to distinguish verbal-mental knowing from felt knowing and recognize the primacy of felt knowing over mental knowing. The difference is all-important.

Verbal-mental knowing is **superficial**; felt knowing has the potential for vastly greater depth. Mental knowing is 3rd person; felt knowing is 1st person. Mental knowing is abstract; felt knowing is intimate. Mental knowing knows the potentialities; felt knowing knows the actualities. Mental knowing is knowing in general; felt knowing is knowing specifically. Mental knowing is mediated by the mind and slowed by an extra thinking step between decision and action; felt knowing is immediate and operates at the speed of life. It's the difference between knowing how a car works and being able to drive, or how to throw a ball and how to pitch a curve ball that is also a strike ball.

Students of somatic education are students of felt knowing, where, "The instruction comes from outside and the learning comes from within."

That little aside, aside, I want to suggest that we show people we can walk our talk by using every instructional means available, including demonstration, to teach. Besides, it gives you an opportunity to treat yourself to doing some somatic exercises.