

# Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis: A Vital Thread with Many Colours

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## Abstract

This article, based on the author's Keynote Address, introduces Laban Movement Analysis and Bartenieff Fundamentals, and provides case studies of relevance to dance–movement therapists, and their application in clinical practice.

**Keywords:** Laban Movement Analysis, Bartenieff fundamentals

I am a weaver and have been for many years. Forty years ago I was weaving wall hangings, clothes, and rugs. Now I weave classes, and client sessions. The client sessions and classes are my favourites. Vibrant dynamic colors are constantly there in the room interacting to change the 'weave' in that magical way that the warp and weft interact to create a color that was never there before.

## One Thread With Many Strands

Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis might be considered one thread in dance–movement therapy, but it is a thread with many strands. There are a wide range of

systems that aid the therapist; many different approaches that bring results when used by a caring practitioner. I have studied many different approaches in my own therapy, including Freudian, Jungian, Authentic Movement and Process Oriented Psychology, but have found that the Laban/Bartenieff work is the approach that provides the broadest framework for understanding what is going on in a client session at the movement level. We can track Body Connectivity, the Energy (Effort) of the movement, the Shape Change and the Spatial Usage.

Other systems offer psychological understandings, but no other system to my knowledge offers such a thorough approach to all ranges of movement experience, from the most fundamental baby developmental movement to that of a fully mature adult who can move with complexity of expressive phrasing in dance. This is because LMA has a large enough framework to recognise distinct movement parameters that can phrase together in various ways for different expressive meaning. By this I mean the Effort 'coloring,' which, for instance, can combine with Body, Shape and Space in various ways that change the meaning. For example, a Strong, Bound, Sudden Effort (Passion Drive) when combined with an earlier Body Connectivity pattern of movement, such as Core-Distal, might feel less threatening than that same Effort constellation combined with a later pattern, such as Upper-Lower or Cross-Lateral, which might cause more damage when used inappropriately.

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But the various 'colors' that the LMA system organizes into are not the whole story. LMA also offers a perspective and a system for tracking constant change while being open to not-knowing in a client session.

### **Tracking Constant Change While Being Open To 'Not-Knowing'**

Being able to consciously track constant changes, while also staying alert to my own 'non-knowing' of what is coming next, allows me to be truly present with my clients and students; to follow the weave of what is rich for them.

Being any kind of therapist requires being able to give a multilayered type of attention. Being a movement therapist requires an even greater degree of skill and subtle awareness, since the messages are coming from the major movement the client is showing me, what Laban called the 'Shadow Movement' and the words that the client speaks (which may be contradictory). But that is not all...oh no...the messages in the room are also coming from the practitioner's own body.

Yes, hopefully because I am in my own body and can listen to my body, the client is receiving the message that it is a safe space to listen to his/her own body. This then provides a double container of attention that helps the client eventually develop an inner witness. Because I am able to track both the client's movement and my own inner experience bodily, and value that in my witnessing, s/he can begin to value her own inner message from her body as well. Katya Bloom, in her excellent book, *The Embodied Self* calls this 'embodied attentiveness'. She encourages psychoanalysts to use a direct experience of their own bodies as a means of registering what is being transmitted non-verbally by their patients (Bloom, 2006). This takes training, and the training process in



Laban Movement Analysis is constantly preparing one for this aspect of the therapist's role.

Now I will introduce some of the colored strands that LMA trains us to track and three case studies that illustrate this work.

### **Colored Strands (Body, Effort, Shape, Space)**

#### **Body: Developmental Movement**

Influences that have been invaluable to me in my therapeutic work include Irmgard Bartenieff's training in physical therapy and development movement that underlies all her work, and the understanding of developmental movement that was brought to the LMA system by Bette Lamont and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (both Laban Movement Analysts).

A 13 year old client I will call 'Poppy' was brought to me by her mother because she was unable to change channels emotionally once she got upset. She was born without a corpus collosum and is unable to think about her emotions or emotionally relate to her thoughts. Normally Poppy is a delightful, fun, outgoing person, however, once she is in an emotional upset, there is no calming her! Her teachers and her parents needed some help. When I saw Poppy move, I realized that she was trying to move in a way that she saw others move, but that she did not have the underlying patterns of development that could support her. Hence she was exhausting herself trying to be in a regular school. She needed to return to developmental movement to build up a set of movement patterns so

she could help organize her body from a lower brain level and self-calm.

I taught Poppy the very early 'Foetal Crossing' pattern (done by babies in utero). She called it, 'The Breathing Egg.' Once she started doing it, I noticed immediately that she began to make a sucking motion and that her eyes closed unconsciously. By tracking this, I knew that she was 'home,' inside herself. This sucking bonding rhythm with herself is important. When I spoke with her mother later, she had not noticed this change despite Poppy being more centered and calm once she completed her 'Breathing Egg Movement'. I suggested that Poppy practice this movement every day, and that whenever she was upset, her mother non-verbally draw her down to the floor and help her begin doing this motion. She did this in the time between our sessions, and was amazed with the results. Our work continued until Poppy and her family moved away. I was very sad to see her go and I miss working with her valiant spirit!

### Body Connectivity

I have an adult client who has been depressed for a long time, and we are working with his desire to 'Go Forward in Life' even though he does not have a vision of what that might be. I began by asking him to move Forward (Space). His usual way of traveling is by leading with his eyes, which then pulls his whole body forward and down from his head. His Passive Weight in his Core drags behind. His Core is not connected to his head and not supporting it. Obviously even with vision, he couldn't manifest into action. In our session we explored letting all four limbs come into and away from Core. We explored initiating movement from Core and following Core.

He also experimented with shifting his weight from being aware of the sensation in his feet and his Core, rather than letting his eyes lead him. When he leads from his Core and feet, using sensation rather than vision, he says he feels 'more confident in being where I am,' rather than having to have it figured out in advance.

I suggested that he try letting his tail lead him, and then switch to his head, and back and forth and changing level. At first he was at a loss for what to do, but then he just got into spirals diving into and out of the floor. His Core was active and connected. He said he really enjoyed taking the risk to move into larger actions. He said he felt like an otter, swimming in life. Activating Core is a major step in claiming life purpose. Which brings us to effort energy.

### Effort energy

One of my clients came to me with a vague sense that she was stuck in her life. She wanted to become more self-expressive. My immediate feeling was that she was distant and far away—sort of Remote (which is a Laban Effort State). I noticed that she consistently preferred moving with a Low Intensity and Even Bound Flow in both an Authentic Movement situation and in full-out dance improvisation. This woman was trained in Ecology and said she wanted to dance. She had had Tourettes Syndrome from the time she was six years old, and she spoke about the need she felt to control herself so that her Tourettes Syndrome would not have a chance to jump out and embarrass her.

From the study of the Kestenberg Movement Profile in my Laban training, I am aware that Low Intensity as a Flow Attribute underlies the Pre-Effort of Gentleness. Gentleness underlies the Effort Quality of Lightness. Even Flow Attribute underlies the Pre-Effort of Channeling which underlies Directness as an Effort Quality.

As I began to work in movement with this client, I began to model Lightness and a fluctuating Flow in my own body as I sat and talked with her, and I invited her to join me as we moved into larger movement. When she moved with me, she was able to choose a more active Effort life and she felt that her energy was freed. From this Light, Free Flowing inner Dream State, I began offering the movement possibility to go out to the world by adding Directness phrasing into a Light, Direct Stable State ending in phrases in many different forms. A feeling of 'I am here', as opposed to being distant and away.

Several sessions later in our Authentic Movement work together, she was able to activate her weight into a true Lightness with Free Flow, even adding aspects of Time variation of Quickness and Sustainment in moments (small moments of Passion Drive). In these moments she smiled. When she spoke at the end, she talked about a delightful carefree feeling that she felt around age five, before the onset of Tourettes. She realized that her inner Passion Drive was still there, even now, and that she could contact that part of herself for her own expression and joy.

At this point she chose to enter a program of study about Somatics and Performance, and now she is delving deeper into her own inner source with ongoing Authentic Movement work. She feels that she is not stuck, but 'in process'.

This progression could possibly have happened without my knowing the Laban/Bartenieff work. Intuitively, I could have matched her Low Intensity, almost Neutral Flow and I could have begun to develop movement work from there. Many dance therapists do this. However, I feel that having the larger framework of LMA helped me be able to be easily with her and also

be able to model other possibilities in Effort that would not be threatening to her.

## Shape

The Shape category of LMA brings us immediately into the realm of 'How We Create Relationships'. The form of the movement provides a container for our Energy, and it has a developmental progression as well; from Shape Flow (self to self form change), to Directional Movement (spoke-like or arc-like, location oriented form change), to Carving. (In the psychological world this Shape Category puts us in the arena of 'Object Relations'.)

Another client recently came to me because he had just had hip replacement surgery, but his knees were hurting all the time. When I watched him walk and stand, he was standing frequently in a Wall Shape with his weight on the outside of his legs, not sequencing up through the inner core of his body. He was injuring his hips and knees by this stance, but it was difficult for him to change it, because he had spent his whole career in working as a parole officer for violent teenage boys, and he felt he needed to be 'the wall they were up against.' We worked to change his Wall Shape by recognizing that he could be powerful without being a wall, by using Core Support and grounding into the earth instead.

One wonderful example of the subtle change Shape Flow Support can bring comes from Kedzie Penfield, who works as a therapist in Scotland.

*Breath support (which is often not there) can also bring emotional reaction which then leads to memory or working through of a past experience. My favorite on this one was a client 'learning how to hug' ie. that is,*

widening and narrowing helped her understand something about really enclosing around someone, then that led to accepting a hug in her mind (Penfield, 2007).

## Space

One of my Laban based dance-movement therapist colleagues in Los Angeles has been having wonderful experiences with her grade school autistic patients by working with the concept of Kinesphere (the space that is my own personal space). She encourages the students to be in charge of experiencing and choosing both the size of Kinesphere in which they move and the Zones in the Kinesphere. She is also gradually bringing in the ability to approach the Kinesphere from Central, Peripheral, and Transverse ways of moving. Each of these non-verbal experiences brings a new possibility for becoming an individual who can hopefully then move into relationships with others.

Again Kedzie Penfield, working in Scotland, says that working in Space with her clients, 'often brings information about the relationship to external structures.... authority or environment in the person's past' (2007).

As all of these examples demonstrate, therapeutic work using LMA is wide-ranging and I have barely touched the surface. Some aspects of LMA can address psychological issues and some more physical issues, which of course interweave with the psychological.

## Conclusion

In closing, I would like to say that I hope that dance-movement therapists in Australia will

- delve deeper into the fabulous tool of Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis,



Peggy Hackney and Australian dance movement therapists in Movement Choir, November, 2007

- continue broadening the range of their services to work with a wide range of people. All people need to have access to the expressive aspects of their bodies. We need to bring the work further out into the world of people who will be appreciative, and also offer ourselves a chance to be paid what we are worth!
- link up with somatic movement therapists and other creative arts therapists to strengthen all of our work in the world,
- use the tool of Movement Choir to bring a sense of community to ourselves and all of those other groups in which we participate, such as church, office and family.

## References

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## Recommended further reading

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