

Connections and Influences: Other paths to Dance Therapy

The following three articles are about connections with, and influences on, dance therapy.- also the theme of the DTAA's next professional development day (see flyer). As many Australian clinicians use dance therapy within the context of other work or combine together various skills and trainings – we invited three people to present articles, prior to their workshops on the Professional development day, selecting frequently linked approaches– Feldenkrais,. Alexander Technique and Reichian perspectives.

The Dance That Connects Feldenkrais With Dance Therapy

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I had always been interested in dance from a young child - in the way it helped me to express myself and experience a sense of freedom within me that I was not able to experience otherwise so readily. But it was not until many years later, following the Graduate Diploma in Movement and Dance, and many years into my study with Dr. Marcia Leventhal, in preparation for achieving my Dance Therapy Certificate from IDTIA, that I came across the Feldenkrais Method. Unlike many colleagues who had already experienced some Feldenkrais workshops and were awaiting a training to begin in Australia, I was a complete novice. I initially heard about it with the first training to occur in Melbourne in 1988 - I read the description of the Method in their brochure and I experienced my first ATM (Awareness through Movement) lesson from an audiotape. Each had a profound effect on me. The description of the course and training

challenged yet excited me - it was to be two months each year (not together) over a period of 4 years. It described the changing of patterns and discovering new choices that would flow from the physical into all facets of one's life. I was going to learn new ways of moving that involved minimum effort and maximum efficiency not through muscular strength but through increased consciousness of how my body works. I had a brief yet powerful glimpse of this with the ATM lesson I experienced where I felt my back lie on the floor in a new released way I had not felt before. The training was going to involve a long-term commitment yet I knew this was a training I had to do.

I realised very quickly how Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) and the Feldenkrais Method complimented each other although I had not sought out the training for this reason. They both had one vital common underlying principle which was that each individual has the ability to change and expand his/her movement patterns to help reach his full potential and as a result, become more self-empowered. The heightened and expanded awareness I was going to develop through my training in Feldenkrais, would help provide ways to recognise my unique patterns as well as patterns of other people more clearly.

Moshe Feldenkrais was born in Russia in 1904 but lived most of his life in Israel. He became a physicist as well as being "recognised as being the first person to introduce Judo to the West. An old soccer injury led him to a lifetime study of the structure and function of the human nervous system and of the relationship between human development, education and movement". (Feldenkrais Guild brochure) Incorporating his many and varied studies including psychology, Neuro Linguistic Training and principles of Judo, he devised the Feldenkrais Method as a way of helping people to reach their full potential. This method can be taught in two different ways -

group classes (Awareness through Movement) or individual lessons (Functional Integration) - both of which focus on ease and pleasure of movement as well as expanding self-awareness.

In the ATM classes the student carries out a series of simple, sequential movements verbally directed by the teacher. The focus is on the process and feeling of sensations rather than the achievement of any goals. We are learning how to learn as if for the first time with the curiosity and sensual delight of a young child. We are encouraged not to compare ourselves to others but to remain focused on our own experience since there is no right or wrong way. This focus compliments our beliefs in DMT where we also encourage the client to re-connect with their creativity and intuition and let go of self-judgement and 'the critic' within.

In Functional Integration (FI) lessons, the student lies on a low table and experiences the practitioner's touch which communicates new ways of moving. It is an individual lesson adapted to meet the specific needs of the student. It has often been described as a dance between two nervous systems where the student and the practitioner are moving in synchrony - the practitioner's touch invites a response which in turn leads to a new informed touch. In dance we are well acquainted with leading, following and moving in synchrony and recognising these distinctions. The dance therapist's experience with attuning to the client - to their personal energy and way of moving - also comes into play within a Feldenkrais lesson. In the same way that the dance therapist needs to make a connection to the client so that the client feels heard and respected, in an FI lesson, this is achieved through an informed and informing touch. I find the art of giving an FI to a client a subtle mix of skill, intuition and improvisation similar to facilitating a Dance/Movement Therapy session. Although I may have an ultimate goal or intention, I may need to discard it according to the client's response or needs at the time. I am constantly needing to pay attention to and be aware of the many and varied non-verbal cues presented and often make decisions intuitively.

The main general reason we seek help from a therapist is that we recognise we are stuck in an old habit or pattern of behaviour that is no longer useful and we want to change it. We may choose to address this in a verbal psychotherapeutic way or we may choose a somatic, basically non-verbal, method which focuses primarily on the body and movement. Both DMT and Feldenkrais recognise that humans are creatures of habit and that although some habits are essential in our lives, they also can become restrictive, addictive and

destructive over time. The Feldenkrais Method provides us with a range of options with movement either through the guided instructions of an ATM or via the hands of the practitioner, where we are encouraged to explore and discover new patterns for ourselves. In Dance/Movement Therapy the movement is more self-directed, the physical boundaries broader, and the primary focus is to develop trust of one's own inner wisdom, intuition and creativity connecting mind, body and spirit. The dance therapist can also employ other means to assist her such as music, props, sound and drawing .

As DMT is a form of psychotherapy, other factors come into play that are of significance to this process. As a therapist I act as a witness for the client with empathic listening and attuning, and make interventions when I feel they are appropriate. I am aware of non-verbal cues and the use of energy between myself and the client and I invite the client to relate her movement to images, thoughts, feelings, dreams or memories to deepen the connections between the movement/dance and her inner world. Although, as a Feldenkrais practitioner, I still view the client as a whole person, I do not intentionally address psychological issues - instead my main focus remains with the person's physical movement as this is primarily the contract the client has entered into with me. Of course the client's emotional and psychological world is addressed in the session but it is not the main focus.

Both modalities provide opportunities for expanding and strengthening one's body image and ultimately one's self-image. With the Feldenkrais Method, we learn how to become aware of our physical kinaesthetic sensations by experiencing and listening internally to new feelings, sensations and changes. We are sensing at a deep level what parts of our bodies are moving, what parts are not, how they are moving, where in space they are moving and how much effort or not is being used. We are developing a strengthened and more refined body image that reflects our body as a fully dimensional whole. We become more embodied and feel more connected to our bodies, our senses and our environment and we feel more fully present to our immediate experiences. As well, Feldenkrais helps in directing one's focus in whichever way it is needed. At times it has helped me to focus on specific detail and at other times to take in the whole picture and to be able move freely back and forth between the two without becoming stuck in the process.

One aspect of both DMT and Feldenkrais that excites, as well as continues to challenge me, is the fact that they both involve the process of

moving from the known or familiar to the unknown. Whether I am facilitating or participating in a DMT session, giving a Feldenkrais Functional Integration Lesson or participating in an ATM, I am entering a transitional space where I need to let go of the safe and familiar and trust in the unfolding process. Exploring and experiencing this frequently, I am learning to relinquish control where it is not necessary and to enter a place of exploration and discovery. I have learnt, when I find myself in this 'unknowing place', how to first recognise it then to accept the initial frustration and uncertainty. I can compare this situation with classes in sculpture where I am undergoing the process of sculpting with clay; needing to be patient, and trusting that I will discover a shape with the clay if I allow it to emerge organically - not forcefully. It seems as if there is a dance between the movement of my hands with their shaping and moulding of the clay similar to the shaping and forming that takes place both when I dance and when I facilitate.

Initially I was hesitant to combine these two modalities in my Dance/Movement Therapy workshops believing that each was a distinct entity in itself and I did not want to dilute or distort either of them. I also felt hesitant in combining a more formal lesson of specific

movements (ATM) followed by the more self-expressive, spontaneous way of moving. I have however discovered that participants respond well to the quiet, grounding movements of the ATM which heightens their kinaesthetic awareness and encourages non-habitual movement. It helps prepare them to enter the exploratory process of discovering their own dance as they are already in a highly aware and internalised state. I find that many create deeply connected dances in a bodily-felt way following this experience. The workshops now reflect both the modalities in the name: 'Dance for Healing with Feldenkrais'.

I am still continually exploring different ways to connect the two modalities and perhaps, at times, I will want to teach them separately as well. What I am certain of is that they are both strongly linked and that they both enhance and support each other. My experiences have led me to believe that the Feldenkrais Method provides a scaffolding and a reinforcement to underpin Dance/Movement Therapy because of its specific attention to the body and movement. They both provide me with tools to help bring about change - change in movement and movement patterns which in turn brings about change in feelings, emotions, thinking and behaviour. They both embrace self-empowerment and healing.