

So, What Is This Thing Called Dance-Movement Therapy?

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Michelle, B.Ed.; Grad. Dip Mvt & Dance; P. Grad. Prof Stud Ed.; Cert. Cr Dance; Dip DMT., has worked as a Dance Movement Therapist in Educational, Clinical, and Community settings and believes that timely opportunities exist for the promotion and validation of this profession – beginning with how it is being defined and perceived. She believes that curiosity and rigorous enquiry are integral to her own development, integrity and longevity in the profession. Much of the following article was written as a short paper for her Dance Movement Therapy Diploma. She says that “True to my assertion that definitions should always be evolving, I have updated that paper for this publication”.

I “stumbled” across a definition of dance-movement therapy put out by The Centre for Mental Health Research, The Australian National University, Canberra, August 2001:

In this type of therapy a dance therapist helps a group of people to express themselves in movement. Expressing feelings in this way is supposed to improve mood....there might also be benefits from the physical exercise, from interacting with

a group and from listening to music....usually led by a dance therapist, however, there are plenty of opportunities for dancing alone or in a group, even without a therapist....Although there is evidence that physical exercise helps depression, dance and movement therapy have not been properly researched.

This definition can still be found on Australian websites and cannot remain unchallenged,* for it is surprisingly ill-informed, unsourced, and superficial, if not patronising. Apart from the fact that Dance Movement Therapy was formally recognised in 1942, is based on a theoretical framework with goals and aims, and has been extensively documented in its application to numerous populations, the above definition makes no distinction between *dance*, *physical exercise* and *Dance Movement Therapy*. How then do we, both *professionally* and *personally*, define what Dance Movement Therapy is?

The first step of my journey...

I had just finished sorting the contents of several dust-laden boxes full of notes and photocopied articles relating to the study of *Dance-Movement Therapy*. This resource material had been read and re-read and understood at a theoretical level but my own personal, truthful, descriptive statement which answered the question: “What is dance-movement therapy?” could not simply be gleaned out of sheets of printed words. The words had to be assimilated and understood at a ‘felt’ level, they had to be put into practice and observed and questioned and re-defined in the light of my own experience and evolving awareness.

But where to begin and how? There was so much weight attached to this question – heavier than boxes full of papers – a depressing inertia. Then, right at the bottom of the *last* box was a torn scrap of paper bearing only these six words:

Searching for the beginning

I know

In truth, I have always known *Dance-Movement* – because it is integral to my “alive, breathing cellular state” (Berger/Leventhal, 1988). Dance and Movement are basic expressive mediums through which humankind has communicated – rhythmically

and symbolically – since pre-historic time. *Movement*, according to Whitehouse (1987), “is not and never will be *mechanical* – it is always and forever expressive, simply because it is human.” (P.17) Movement reflects and reveals our personality and Espenak (1981) has observed that change in the personality can be achieved by modifying physical states.

However, movement itself is action in response to the demands of our existence. It is functional, rational, voluntary or habitual, whereas Whitehouse (2002) describes *Dance* as a form of movement that is neither voluntary nor rational but rather an urge to move driven by feeling impulses.

As Espenak (1981) describes it, “Dance in itself provides a sensory-oriented, as well as a motor experience, a combined impact of the two sensations...(producing) a quality of spontaneous abandonment, a surge of natural spirit, a sensation of joy in being alive. This experience, half sensual, half spiritual, is therapeutic in itself as shown in history all over the world.” (P. 10)

The purposefulness of functional *Movement* together with the expressive spontaneity of *Dance* endows us with enormous *range* with which to engage both physically and emotionally. However, *range* is not always accessible. One might also question the extent to which Dance and Movement, separately or combined, are *therapeutic processes*. They can effect benefits such as release, energy flow, bodily engagement, creativity and social interaction but without going “beyond the authentic expressive action/movement/dance to a place where decision, forming, and clear expression are forefront” (Leventhal, 1991. P.2) transformation at deeper levels can not occur.

In the context of *Therapy*, a framework is given to the release of energy from Dance and Movement. The therapeutic framework embraces the subtle awareness of sensory perceptions, bodily symptoms and accompanying patterns. Siegel (1995) points out that dance therapy not only addresses what a person feels physically and psychically, but also how and when these are processed. Furthermore, as Bunney (1979) purports, these inner processes are in fact *activated* by dance therapy.

“Dance therapy utilises the inherent power of movement to open a channel of expression and communication for the patient through rhythms, music, improvisation, and other stimulation techniques. Its focus is the movement evolved from the patient’s perception of his body and its relation to time, to space, to floor, to walls, and to others. Its subject matter is the raw material of the patient’s

experience. Its form is the shaping and organising of this raw material to render it intelligible to the patient and to others.” (Espenak 1981. P.34)

The next step...

Again, I decided to re-examine what I did know - my functioning, expressive, physical self. The self who loved to dance and move. This exploration was guided by the five-level model of *therapeutic unfolding* (Leventhal, 1991, 1993). What I discovered was that my essential physical self or original nature was obstructed by unresolved experiences and blocked energy flow. While my *authentic dance* lay dormant, I had been dancing to countless, inharmonious, tunes that scored the surface of my life. They were neither fulfilling nor creative but they had become familiar, even habitual, and safe.

As soon as I identified symbolically, metaphorically, that I was out-of-step with my own rhythmic source, I was keen to expand my *therapeutic journey*. For me, this meant finding the way back to what I knew and re-remembering it as what “I know”. Paradoxically, stepping back to my past was my first step towards the future and fresh insights into the healing continuum.

Maslow (1997) talks about stepping forward into unfamiliar territory as being potentially dangerous. It involves giving up what is familiar, good, and satisfying. Frequently requiring a parting and a separation. He likens it to a process of death and re-birth with accompanying nostalgia, fear, loneliness and mourning.

Why then, would I give up habits that had helped me cope, habits that made my life simpler and easier? Perhaps it was time to discover that, as Maslow believed, the need to strive to reach higher levels of human capacity was inherent in everyone. The steps in my process paralleled and clarified the stages involved in the therapeutic paradigm. For example: Taking steps to *walk* physically involves – initiation of weight; articulation of body parts; locomotion through space; transfer of weight; extensor muscles; verticality; balance; direction or focus of attention in space. Walking is also a metaphor for the therapeutic process, involving trust/fear; self-protection; drive; independence; support; self-image; inner/outer connectedness; intent.

Carl Rogers (1997) observed how people changed through therapy. He noted that optimally functioning persons were open to their experience; were aware of immediate experience; and trusted their experience as a basis for decision and action.

Defined by The American Association of Dance/Movement Therapy, "Dance/Movement Therapy is the psychotherapeutic use of movement as a process which furthers the emotional, cognitive, social and physical integration of the individual." This definition encompasses self-knowledge and bodily awareness, wellness, growth, and creativity. It also requires us to consider the use of movement as a *psychotherapeutic* tool.

Having determined the importance of linking dance–movement and psychology, thereby giving credence to each, Liljan Espenak (1981) evolved the term *Psychomotor Therapy* which transcends mere exercise (motor without psyche) and mere dramatic acting (psychology without movement).

Words themselves will inevitably elicit different responses from individuals and organisations, according to their level of understanding or experience. Health professionals with little or no experience of intimate, expressive dance, may underestimate its value.

Dance is so often seen as an inaccessible, performance-oriented or technique-based skill that should be on a stage and not in a clinic. Not only is there a prevalent culture when it comes to approaching and perceiving *dance* but there is also a common practice now (with internet and directory services) of categorizing *therapists* with *consultants* while merging a variety of vocational fields that have anything loosely to do with "lifestyle". The 2006 Australian Government Careers Job Search website, for example, links occupations in health, fitness, hair and beauty. Professionally, we need to distinguish Dance-Movement *Therapy* from skin therapy, colour therapy, massage therapy, sex therapy and so forth. The ADTA's use of the word *Psychotherapy* serves to delineate this treatment model from the others.

The link with psychology could be made even more specific. Coined as "*Dynamic Movement Therapy*", it perhaps aligns itself more closely with *Dynamic Psychology* or *Psychodynamics* – both of which emphasize the interplay of conscious and unconscious forces (drives, motives, needs, instincts, wishes) in the direction of behaviour. It also might echo Kurt Lewin's (1997) theory of *Group Dynamics* and the group's intent to reach specific goals. Alternatively, "*Dynamic Movement Psychotherapy*" would suggest an emphasis on patient history and ways of directly approaching the patient's stumbling blocks. There are countless other combinations and variations (eg., "*Dynamic Psychotherapeutic Dance & Movement Intervention*") but what this exercise has served to prove is that we can miss the perfect simplicity and

general accessibility implicit in the name *Dance Movement Therapy* and if, through dance, people have the means of accessing their 'self'–understanding and working with what they feel about and how they see their 'self'– then the principles from the other disciplines have in fact been transcended.

It is significant that Dance Movement Therapy has not only been embraced in Australia but that it has been struggled with and wrestled with and born out of a selfless pioneering spirit of volunteers - teachers and students alike creating its unique history and promoting its viable future. In 1988, well before the incorporation of the DTAA in 1994, a definition was formulated and adopted by the Australian Dance Therapy Development Group:

Dance therapy is based on the art and science of human movement. It offers experiences which, extending beyond the purely functional, engage both body and mind. Drawing on the therapeutic elements inherent in dance, therapists aim at restoring balance and integration in the areas of physical function, feelings and cognition. The work of the dance therapist is applicable to children and adults in diverse settings and can be adapted to the needs of clients suffering from a wide range of specific and non-specific disorders and disabilities.

Reference to the 'art' and 'science' of human movement is important. It illustrates the balance of recognised disciplines, the wholeness of the approach, and it claims integrity for the profession. Though there are certain irrefutable key elements of Dance Movement Therapy, as the profession evolves here in Australia, so too will our ability to define it. Bodies of words need movement in order to enliven them – deliberation, inspiration, flux and flow.

In reality, it has taken me a surprising number of years (in flux and flow) to explore and apply the fundamental principles of *Dance-Movement Therapy* – both personally and professionally – and to come to a definition of my own, born out of critical, structured, observation and enquiry. In truth, it is not really my own. It is a collection of truths that I have read about or seen or felt. I would like to think that the following definition is, and always will be, consciously evolving – this, after all, is the beginning of what "I know".

Dance/Movement Therapy is an established, accredited and internationally recognised professional service which employs skilled

observation, analysis and evaluation of individual clients, pairs or groups. Fundamentally, the discipline relates movement to the health of the client. Since the instrument used in treatment is the body itself, Dance Movement Therapy can be a primary treatment modality for addressing non and pre verbal issues including trauma and body-image. It applies the psychotherapeutic use of movement as a process of accessing and ameliorating bodily-assimilated blocks to wellness and personal growth. It seeks to develop the client's security in self-sensing and thereby support the expression of his/her corresponding intent for establishing inner and outer connectedness.

movement therapy that exist in the various sectors of the community. They would appreciate any assistance possible from members by bringing to their attention any such definitions or misinformation about dance-movement therapy found so that the situation can be addressed and corrected. Contact can be made with the committee via email: dtaa@alphalink.com.au

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***Ed. Note: Please note - the DTAA Industrial relations committee, of which Michelle is a member, together with Elizabeth Mackenzie and Ana Gioino, are working towards addressing this and other ill informed definitions of dance-**