

Saumaa, Hiie. "Somatic Practices: Going Beyond the Classroom to Build Resilience and Gain New Insights." *Alternative and Complementary Therapies*, 2020, Vol. 26, No. 3, 106-108.

Somatic Practices: Going Beyond the Classroom Setting

Hiie Saumaa, PhD

What is "Somatic"?

In the field of dance and movement studies and practice, "somatic" does not mean merely "bodily" or "physical." In somatic classes the attention is on what movement means to the participants or what it evokes in them, as well as how they sense their embodiment. The goals of somatic movement classes thus differ from those of traditional dance technique classes or fitness classes. We do not go to somatics classes to work out until physically exhausted, to push the body to run faster, jump higher, or lift heavier weights, or to compete and perform in front of the others. We go to somatics classes to connect with our bodies, our inner world, and, depending on the practice, to commune with other movers and perhaps even with energy and life force beyond us. Participants' inner experience – what they sense physically, feel emotionally and mentally – is just as important as, or even more important than, their outer, kinetic movement.

Although in biology "somatic" refers to the body as distinct from the mind, "somatic" in dance and movement studies refers to the field of "somatics," which is an

umbrella term for a number of movement practices that focus on an individual's experience with movement. The Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method©, Mind-Body Centering®, 5Rhythms, Nia, SuryaSoul©, Continuum, Soul Motion©, JourneyDance™, and Shake Your Soul® are among these practices. The coinage of the term “somatics” is attributed to philosopher and Feldenkrais practitioner Thomas Hanna. In his 1986 article “What is Somatics?” Hanna notes that the soma is the body perceived not from the third-person point of view, outwardly, but from within the first-person perspective: “The soma, being internally perceived, is categorically distinct from a body, not because the subject is different but because the mode of viewpoint is different: it is immediate proprioception – a sensory mode that provides unique data.”¹

A somatic class attempts to increase participants' awareness of their sensations and how they feel in their bodies. Somatics help us understand, as we move in the world, what it is like to live in a sensing, intelligent, lively body – what it is like to be alive, awake, alert. Often, participants gain insights not only into their physical selves but also what their emotions, mental state, and imagination are like on a given day. Somatic movement classes may calm the nervous system, make us feel more connected to our bodies and help us get in touch with what our bodies are telling us through physical sensations. The classes can increase our range of motion and flexibility, help with posture and alignment, and make us more fit and stronger physically. Moving mindfully with others can give us a sense of community, lift our spirits, nourish our emotions, put us in touch with joy, gratitude, and trust, and increase our creativity and self-expressivity.

But how does one take the lessons learned in somatic movement classes and use them in daily life? How to make the positive and healthful physical, mental, and

emotional effects last? What steps can somatics professionals take in order to help clients use somatic tools outside of the context of a classroom or a private session, so that they actively choose healthier habits and keep up a healthy lifestyle? This question of how to encourage clients to put what they have learned in a session into practice and make healthier choices is one that medical professionals share.

In what follows, I examine the notion of transfer – the act of bringing experience or knowledge from one realm of life into another. Whether and how do experiences in somatic movement classes impact participants’ life? For example, could skills gained in somatic classrooms help strengthen emotional resilience and help during times of increased stress and challenge? To investigate these questions, I look into my own and my clients’ experiences. My goal is to inspire readers to actively pay attention to how experiences gained through mindful movement and somatic dance could carry over to their experiences outside of the movement class. A sentence or motto such as “life is a dance,” “dance your life,” or “my life and dance are one flow” might be commonplace; yet articulating what exactly makes “life” a “dance” or how exactly one life sphere influences another can be challenging. I suggest that learning to transfer knowledge and skills between life spheres is valuable and constitutes a type of intelligence not often talked about in the context of movement education.

Examples from Somatic Practices

While all somatic practices aim to contribute to participants’ wellbeing, some methods have a clear focus on helping students maintain better posture, alignment, and a sense of ease not only during or after the class but in their lives in general. The Alexander

Technique, for example, is concerned with how we *use* the body in our daily activities – be it sitting, walking, sleeping, or gazing at a computer screen or typing a text message. Alexander Technique practitioners observe their daily physical and mental habits and learn to replace habits that lead to muscular holding patterns and physical and mental stress with habits that are mindful of physical alignment and the body’s architecture. In the words of Glen Park, author and Alexander Technique practitioner, the Alexander Technique teaches how to release chronic patterns of misuse, “not only when you are at home, recovering from the trials of the day, nor simply during the period of an Alexander lesson, but actually during the times that the stress is at its greatest. It is possible to apply the technique to any situation in your life.”²

In the dance and meditation practice SuryaSoul©, the creators Sabine Zweig and Philippe Beaufour deliberately draw participants’ attention to their actions and choices outside the dance studio. “What will you take from this workshop to your life? What is the word that remains in your mind and body?” they would ask. The question is not rhetorical – the participants answer. “What do you bring to the dance today?” the leaders ask before the session. “My calmness; my humor; my movements; the energy of my body; my kindness,” the participants might reply. “What you do in this workshop, what you practice and gain here – your energy, your mood, your touch, your sense of peace – will impact those around you – your pets, your kids, your partner, your neighbors, your community, your city, the earth, the universe,” the teachers remind us, referring to the awareness of widening circles of influence, from the individual to the community to the world.

In one exercise in, SuryaSoul the participants are in groups of three: the person in the middle lays his/her hands on the shoulders of the two partners, relaxes the knees, slightly arches the spine and opens the chest and the throat to the space above. Together the three movers slowly walk across the room. “I just had a physical sensation of opening my heart, being in a vulnerable position, and these two partners were here for me; I was able to lean on them and feel open-hearted,” I noticed after this exercise. My interactions with these two partners inside and outside of the class were immediately different because of this nonverbal movement experience: I felt kindness and trust. This feeling inspired me to be more heartfelt in my dynamics with other people in my life, a lesson we need to be reminded of.

Somatic Transfer

In *How To Land*, dance scholar and dancer Ann Cooper Albright posits that there is a link between how we think and how we move through the world. She illuminates how the improvisational partner dance form, Contact Improvisation, somatic in its intent, teaches how to “fall with pleasure and not fear, how to expand into the ground and not tense away from it.”³ Her book uses the concept of falling, the notion developed from this physical practice of Contact Improvisation, to tackle political events of contemporary America and shed light on disorientation, trauma, and a sense of insecurity, instability, and anxiety that are a part of many people’s lives. The account shows how a somatic movement form can potentially help us navigate life’s insecurities and teach us how to “accept our falls with grace and learn how to land with intention.”⁴

In my last year of doctoral studies, I was facing many stressful circumstances: writing a dissertation, a process in which the creator is mostly alone and in face of criticism by the advisers, is difficult in its own right. Added to that were other stressors: will I get an academic job that grants me a visa to stay in the United States? Will I leave this country? Where will I live? Where is my income going to come from? During these times, I often felt how my grounding was unstable – I was not able to project into the future and imagine possible routes. I was in particular need of emotional resilience. Actively engaging with the unknown and the unpredictable is a necessity in life; long-term instability, however, can come at a cost.

Almost daily I would go to my local neighborhood gym on the Upper West Side in Manhattan. I was learning and practicing BodyLogos© – a strength training practice developed by former Broadway dancer and Taoist minister Tammy Wise in New York City. In this conditioning practice, one not only sculpts the muscles but also learns how to work with energy, attend to the sensations in the muscles and let go of unnecessary tensions and muscular holding patterns. Conditioning becomes a time to commune with the muscles and bones, to sense the body from the inside out, to meditate as one moves the weights or a resistance band. Taoist principles of Yin and Yang, Five Elements, and the knowledge of acupuncture pressure points are integrated into the practice.

I was working with freeweights of different sizes, shaping the muscles of the arms, the back, and the chest. Doing another round of triceps extensions, bending and unbending the arm from the elbow, I realized that what I was holding in my hands was, yes, a dumbbell, but this dumbbell could be a symbol for something else. It could stand for any kind of resistance that I had to face – my dissertation, my advisers' feedback, the

difficulty of finding a job, a visa, money, and feelings of anxiety and fear of the future. I was holding a dumbbell in my hand, but in my inner world, I saw and sensed an image of me engaging with challenging aspects of my life at that moment. At the gym, doing triceps extensions and biceps curls, I was learning about connecting, over and over, to a challenge.

This education directly impacted my work. Instead of quitting my project or feeling discouraged by others' comments, I kept engaging with the project. I kept connecting to it. Writing became a practice of mental weightlifting. My practice of turning inward, feeling the weight of the dumbbells and sensing the response of the muscles helped me build perseverance in writing. I transferred the skillset that I was developing in the weight room to my work as an intellectual.

Another instance of transfer occurred via my Nia dance classes. Nia is a somatic dance form that blends elements from martial arts, dance arts, and healing practices. It combines easy choreography, free movement expression, and exploration of movement from the inside out. I struggled with the free dance component for years: when the instructor left us completely to our own devices I felt uncomfortable. I did not know what to do or how to move; I felt self-conscious and ungraceful. I stayed with the practice, learned more about the technique, became fascinated with exploring different ways to move in this nonjudgmental setting, and started to let go of my inner inhibitions. Little by little I started to enjoy free dance to the extent that my attitude changed completely: free dance became one of my favorite components of the class and I did not think twice when the instructor asked us to move in our own way. I was right there, in my own expression and exploration, uninhibited and free.

During this time, I was experiencing one of the most prominent stumbling blocks for any writer – procrastination. Activities such as reading or doing extensive research or taking notes and polishing already written pieces easily take over the actual writing. Hours and days go by, some work gets done, but little or no writing happens. As I was sitting behind my computer and busying myself with watching YouTube videos waiting for the right mood to start writing, I suddenly thought of my dance classes. I remembered how easy it was for me to step into the free dance mode in my Nia classes even though I had had difficulties with it before. “Could I do something similar in my work as a writer?” I wondered. “Could I just start writing and be in the flow, right away?” My body remembered clearly what it was like to start dancing, to get absorbed, fully focused on what I was doing, in a state of flow. Because I had trained this capability in myself physically – it felt familiar to my body – I was able to recreate a similar state mentally. My experience on the dance floor carried over directly into my experience as a writer. My mind was dancing, freely, creatively, staying on task.

Years later, working with a client and her fourteen-year-old daughter, in a mother-daughter Nia dance class, I encountered a similar scenario. At the outset of the session the mother mentioned that the daughter had been working on a short story but had stopped because she did not know how to move forward. She had a “writer’s block.” During the class, we did several movement activities that were related to this question – we conjured up the characters of her story and their personalities as we danced; we used sharper and more categorical martial arts inspired moves to “break free” from the writer’s block or to “throw” it out of the way. We imagined having a “magic wand” and used it to give one another different movement impulses and created imaginary landscapes and

colors. We enlivened our imaginations through movement. Two hours after the class, I heard from the mother than the daughter had found a way to continue her short story.

Conclusion

“Transferable skills” are talked about in high school, college, and university settings: developing “transferable skills” in students could be one of the goals of a teacher or a professor. The notion of transfer should also be taken seriously in movement education: the nonverbal communication and a sense of belonging in a community make somatic movement classes particularly rich for potential insights and knowledge that might arrive kinetically, nonverbally. Building links between “movement” and “life” is an area where somatic practices can potentially contribute a lot.

The instances that I discussed serve as examples of a possible fruitful and empowering relationship between a somatic health and wellbeing activity, on the one hand, and a different practice or activity, on the other. Practitioners of alternative and complementary therapies can recommend somatic movement classes as one possible way for clients to develop holistic lifestyles. Noticing what happens to us inwardly and outwardly as we move and learning to transfer this knowledge to other life scenarios can be a powerful resource for building emotional resilience, inner strength, and novel problem solving. Practicing opening our hearts on the dance floor, sensing peace as we dance with other movers, or exercising our imaginations and inner sight as we connect to our muscles and bones in the weight room can find their way into our daily existence and lead to more fulfilling, enriching, embodied, and soulful life experiences. Some resources

to find local classes are (nianow.com), (journeydance.com), (5rhythms.com), (tamalpa.org), and (suryasoul.com).

References

¹ Hanna, T. “What is Somatics?” *Somatics* 5 (4), 4.

² Park, G. *The Art of Changing: A New Approach to the Alexander Technique*. Bath: Ashgrove Press, 1989, 10.

³ Albright, A.C. *How to Land: Finding Ground in an Unstable World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 10.

⁴ Albright, A.C. *How to Land: Finding Ground in an Unstable World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 10.

Hiie Saumaa, PhD (Columbia University), is a dance writer and movement educator.

She writes about interconnections between dance, language, somatics, embodied knowledge, and imagination. In 2018-2019, she was an inaugural fellow at Columbia University’s Institute for Ideas & Imagination in Paris, France, and in 2017, she was a fellow at the Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. She has taught at Columbia University, New York University, the University of Tennessee, Paris College of Art, Emlyon Business School, and the Catholic University of Paris. Dr. Saumaa is completing a book on the multi-artistry and creativity of the choreographer Jerome Robbins. Her publications have appeared in *Dance Research Journal*, *Dance Chronicle*, *The Journal of Dance, Movement, and Spiritualities*, *Somatics Magazine/Journal*, and *Routledge Companion to Dance Studies*, among others. She is a certified instructor of Nia dance, BodyLogos©, and JourneyDance™, and teaches classes

and workshops in sensory-based dance modalities, creative movement, expressive arts, meditative strength training, and somatic awareness.