

Developing Listening Bodies in the Dance Technique Class

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When you dance, what is your body telling you?

What does it mean *to listen*? The definition by Merriam Webster OnLine (n.d.), “to hear something with thoughtful attention,” can serve as a useful basis for this discussion. Body listening for dance is simply to attend closely to the processes, functions, needs, and intuitions of the body within the context of dance. Although the idea of body listening is not necessarily revolutionary or ground breaking, it is, nevertheless, a concept that has been under-emphasized in the dance technique class and should be revisited. The structure of a traditional dance class does not currently offer sufficient opportunities for students to develop a sensitized relationship with their body. In the pursuit of technical training and virtuosity, manifested in “mechanical repetitions of movements,” many dancers have actually become “disembodied from their experience” (Fortin, 2002, p. 133) and may have diminished the delicate, open-looped channel of communication with their somatic voice. The purpose of this article is to provide a practical framework for infusing a more somatic or body-listening approach into the dance class. The article will briefly define somatics and describe and exemplify five somatic components of body listening for the dance technique class.

A somatic or body-listening approach—culled from a wide range of scientific, experiential, and creative domains—emphasizes a holistic conception of the body. Thomas Hanna (1993) first coined the term *somatics* approximately 30 years ago, citing the Greek word *soma*, which denotes the dynamic, living body that exists in space and time. According to Hanna (1995), somatics refers to a study of the body “from the first-person viewpoint of his own proprioceptive senses” (p. 341). In recent history, the somatic perspective has been increasingly used as a tool in the dance class. Martha Eddy (2002) poignantly stated, “When the dancing body is approached from a holistic perspective, which involves experiential inquiry inclusive of physical awareness, cognitive reflection, and insights from feelings, the dancing is somatic” (p. 119). Eddy went on to clarify that some forms of dance education are overtly somatic, and others are implicitly somatic, in so far as they focus in varying degrees on the whole person, including emotional, psychological, and even spiritual components.

It is important to acknowledge the difference between the specific somatic-based knowledge, tools, and skills of professional practitioners in “codified” modalities—such as Alexander Technique, Body-Mind Centering, and the Feldenkrais method (which Hanna studied)—and the way that the term *somatic* is used in this article, as it might be applied by most dance teachers. The established somatic modalities are quite in-depth and require many hours of prerequisites and specialized study. However, the most basic common denominator of these practices is the importance of the first-person, experiential approach, which emphasizes awareness of sensation,



With the visual sense restricted, the “Moving Toward the Touch” exercise uses touch to develop kinesthetic, spatial, and perceptual listening skills.

or the act of listening to the body. It is with this idea that a journey toward a somatic-based pedagogy can begin.

Over a decade ago, a case study by Fortin (1994) revealed the specific beliefs and practices of a dance teacher with a background in somatic modalities and how that knowledge informed her practice. Glenna Batson, the subject of Fortin’s study, explained that she was more interested in teaching from the “sensation of the movement” (p. 94). Her somatic background informed her pedagogical practice differently than other modern dance teachers, who, she said, teach dance as steps without realizing that “it is one’s senses that organize the movement” (p. 94). This sensing, or body listening, is a key component to teaching from a somatic perspective.

Another noteworthy study by Fortin, Long, and Lord (2002), which analyzed how the Feldenkrais method informs the dance classes of teachers who are trained in this somatic modality, provides additional information on the subject of somatics and dance learning, collected from three different sources. Most notably, one researcher (a dance teacher and Feldenkrais practitioner) found several ways to facilitate movement awareness in dance classes informed by somatics. His findings included (1) highlighting different ways to achieve the task, (2) comparing sensations of different movement initiations and directing attention to the sensation of movement in task execution, (3) describing skeletal movement while looking for precise sensations, (4) repeating movement to obtain a clearer sensation, (5) using tactile feedback with a partner, and (6) using self-questioning. Again, sensation is the main goal, and it is achieved through a range of strategies that deepen and reflect upon it.

Through research, several years of observation, and reflection, the author has begun to construct a pedagogical

structure for infusing a somatic component into the contemporary dance-technique class. The following five categories or components of somatic exploration, or body listening, can be incorporated into a (most likely modern) dance technique class of any level: (1) spatial-perceptual, (2) kinesthetic, (3) breath, (4) eco-somatic, and (5) creative.

Together the five body-listening categories can help a teacher to envision a somatic-based curriculum, and give him or her a foundation on which to plan such lessons. It is helpful to work from this variety of orientations because it allows for flexibility and adaptability. Undoubtedly, each teacher will bring his or her own expertise, professional experience, and personal perspective to the categories. Many of the following ideas are already considered part of the dance technique class, such as a focus on breath, the use of imagery, and even weight-sharing. However, the more experiential, process-oriented approach described in this article expands the traditional conception of the technique class. This work can be applied to all levels and contexts of dance classes—from the beginner to the professional-level dancer—and it can be further expanded by exploring experiential anatomy, as well as through reflective activities such as writing, drawing, or discussion.

Spatial-Perceptual Listening

The primary purpose of this emphasis is to awaken the senses and prepare the body and mind for learning, as well as to help in the development of the kinesthetic sense. The body moving in space and time takes in a plethora of information, which must be processed before a motor response is given. Numerous interconnected networks are involved in the motor-learning process, including the nervous system, the visual and auditory systems, the proprioceptors, the vestibular system, and the muscular system. A somatic approach acknowledges the complexity of this process and focuses on enlivening these systems, making the body and mind more flexible, open, and ready to learn. As Andrea Olsen (1998) so accurately stated, “The more developed and thorough our capacity for receiving and responding to sensory information, the more choices we have about movement coordination and body functioning” (p. 16). One way of accomplishing this involves the use of improvisational structures within the technique class, rather than just “see and do” exercises. Teachers of modern technique classes use improvisational-based activities within a given technique class on a regular basis to achieve creative development and alignment, or to hone a technical concept. Kent De Spain (2003), a dance and multidisciplinary artist who has extensive experience in performing, teaching, and writing about the improvisational process, has said,

There are so many reasons to improvise: warming up, creating specific movement for choreography, bonding groups of people together, exploring new movement qualities, achieving a particular somatic state, creating a performance, having fun. In such cases, improvisation can be seen as a kind of tool for accomplishing some purpose. (p. 27)

In this article, improvisation is used as a tool for deepening a first-person (somatic) dance or movement experience, as opposed to applying it toward deepening or investigating a choreographic or other movement idea.

It is in this context that the following activity, called “moving toward the touch,” is suggested.

“Moving toward the touch” uses improvisation and partnering as tools for building kinesthetic awareness. In pairs, one student chooses to be a mover and the other an initiator. The mover closes his or her eyes. The initiator then begins with soft, but direct touch (two or three fingers) of a body part on the mover. The mover responds to the touch by moving that location or body part toward the touch. The initiator continues to touch the mover in different places, keeping the pacing fairly slow at first. The body tends to want to move away from the tactile stimulus, so this becomes an effective sensory and perceptual challenge for the participant. Also, the initiator needs to touch without directing the mover’s body in any way, so that the mover maintains the full responsibility of interpreting that touch. Keeping one’s concentration is another beneficial challenge for the mover, in order to manifest a flow of movement.

Working through an open-looped or improvisatory structure propels kinesthetic awareness in a nonanalytical manner, facilitating an experiential, rather than rote, way of learning. The mover must listen to and respond with his or her body in an unpredictable way, thus heightening his or her awareness through spontaneous responses.

From this basic model, variations on this activity can be developed, such as trading partners, touching more than one location at one given time, or setting rules about the quality or speed of the movement responses (as with flicks or dabs, fast or slow). More complex variations further challenge the mover to maintain accurate and fluent responses through focus and concentration, which demonstrates the mind-body union that defines somatic awareness.

Teachers can also facilitate spatial-perceptual listening by changing the traditional spatial paradigm of the technique class, where each student stands at a comfortable distance from every other student, with everyone facing the front. Exploring the sub-concepts of space (levels, pathways, or directions), while negotiating between and around other dancers, is an excellent start. Students who were otherwise unengaged or listless during a regular technique class suddenly become energized and alert with such an activity. Any activity that is interactive or improvisatory, that uses basic movement elements (such as elements of space), and that can move through several variations in a short time can be effective. Traditional technical exercises can also be approached this way, for example, by focusing on slow-motion tracking of the spatial acuity of one’s limbs in three-dimensional space. The dancer could also pause to explore the moment of balance or weight shifting that occurs in a combination by working with specific, dynamic imageries, such as a sphere of tethered, tensile lines extending outward, with emphasis on oppositional pulls.



Photo by Peter Gornault; dancers: Corie Thomas, Montez Nash

As a part of eco-somatic listening, students can perceive space as having a dynamic, fluid relationship with the body rather than existing as a separate entity around it.

Kinesthetic Listening

The kinesthetic avenue incorporates not only the idea of tactile feedback by the teacher, but also the examination and processing of information the learner receives from doing movement. In motor learning, this is called “implicit feedback,” referring to the feedback a person receives from simply doing the movement as opposed to the information that comes from external sources, such as the teacher or a mirror. Fortin’s case study (1994) revealed two main principles that spearhead Batson’s teaching: kinesthetic sense and whole-body connectedness. Focusing on the kinesthetic sense allows the dancer to learn about and trust his or her own choices, evaluations, and perceptions when doing and learning movements. This can be transforming and empowering, especially when students are accustomed to using external sources as their only guide for analyzing and rating their progress.

This kinesthetic category also uses improvisation—including contact improvisation—as a primary vehicle for kinesthetic listening. Through improvisatory weight-sharing, students work at the somatic level. This can be effectively executed with simple palm-to-palm, shoulder-to-shoulder, or head-to-head contact, or with more advanced, full-body work that involves flowing through challenging, dynamic, and unpredictably quick weight-sharing situations. Lastly, and equally important, is the concept of tactile feedback. A somatic approach to teaching would include peer-, teacher-, and self-initiated tactile indications to help train the body to perceive the correct sensation or “feel” of a movement. This may require reinforcing a perceived line of movement or energy with a swipe of a hand along a limb, or indicating



Through imagery and touch, a teacher can help a student sharpen kinesthetic awareness and clarify the initiation or “feel” of a movement.

an oppositional pull with contact on two body parts. Touch can also be effective in helping a student find a movement’s initiation point; in guiding its direction and follow through; or in bringing consciousness to an area that may have been otherwise ignored, improving the efficiency of a movement or giving rise to an image that facilitates efficiency and accuracy. For example, a tactile reminder on the back of the head radiating energy outward like a sun can help reduce a forward-aligned head or shortened cervical spine. Having the students themselves simultaneously palpate and feel a connection from the lower to the upper abdominals (bringing the lower hand closer to the upper hand) helps them engage the abdominals and bring a forwardly-tipped pelvis back into alignment.

Listening Through Breath

Breath is at the core of our very existence. It forms the foundational developmental pattern in the infant, providing a ground level from which all patterns emanate (Hackney, 1998). A somatic approach to breath is holistic, acknowledging the effects it has on the organs, muscles, stance, intention, emotion, and physical performance, both in training and in performance. It also affirms the dynamic state of the experiential moment, as each person tunes inward to listen to each inhale and exhale. Breath can be a very powerful way to build and retain concentration, endurance, focus, and flow in the dancing moment. In Body-Mind Centering exercises, cellular breathing and navel radiation use breath as a catalyst for deepening body awareness and for the envisioning of wholeness, calling on our evolutionary lineage (Cohen, 1993). Breath is a means of integrating the body and enlivening “deadened” parts that can impede even daily

functioning. Focusing on breath through movement can enhance both capacity (function) and expression, influencing initiations, articulation, musicality, artistry, and general ease of movement, and it also serves as a vehicle for recuperation, a vital characteristic of a listening body. Breath can often be successfully paired with imagery to achieve many technical goals in the dance class. Hackney (1998) stated that breath can be the vehicle for recuperation, for connecting to the internal self, and for activation. Calling attention to dancers’ individual breathing habits both in and out of the dance class can provide a wealth of information about tensions that can inhibit freedom of movement. Breath can also be vital to initiating and completing a movement, as well as to defining its overall phrasing. Such internal, or “breath” phrasing, is a rich avenue for students to explore. In a traditional class format, conscious breathing strategies can be threaded into a warm-up exercise for the purpose of gaining focus, bodily awareness, and energy activation. Students can attend to their breath in center-floor or across the floor movements to improve the efficiency of their breathing and to pace their performance. Finally, attention to breath at the conclusion of a class, such as slowing the breath rate by extending the exhale to twice the duration of the inhale, will bring the heart rate down, calm the nervous system, and help the body and mind digest what was learned.

Eco-somatic Listening

The relationship of our body to nature and even to the cosmos is central to this fourth component, primarily based on principles delineated by ecopsychologist, Laura Sewell. The term *eco-somatic* is used in this article to refer to the application of Sewell’s five skills of ecological perception in a dance-learning context. Fortin (2002) refers to eco-somatics as a relational approach to somatics that moves beyond an individualistic focus and crosses sociocultural boundaries. For this component, the term *eco-somatic* accurately acknowledges the relational aspects of body, both to itself and to the universe. Eco-somatics accounts for the whole person, not excluding the environmental context in which the person lives and moves. Threading her ecopsychological orientation through her research in vision, Sewell delineated skills of perception that, if honed, could produce in each individual an improved relationship to the environment (and a transformed world). Sewell’s five skills are (1) paying attention; (2) perceiving relationships, contexts, and interfaces; (3) perceptual flexibility; (4) re-perceiving depth; and (5) using the imagination intentionally (Sewell, 1995). According to Fortin, Long, and Lord (2002), “A new perception of our body-soma can result in a new position from which to view the world” (p. 175). Translating these awareness-building skills into a dance-learning context allows the student to break through the studio wall and ponder the relationship of his or her dancing self to both a common evolutionary history and a defining cultural context from which his or her dancing body has emerged. These skills may seem a bit abstruse when their application

to a dance context is considered. However, working through this translation—many times in a metaphorical way—can inspire new ideas that may never have otherwise arisen. For example, simply rethinking the vitality of attention is an effective lens for a dance class or series of classes. Sewell suggested renewing the emphasis on how and to what we attend. For the dance student, this can be a revolutionary experience. One sample activity is to pair students up and to direct one partner to improvise with a specific intent, centered on an image (such as a moving cloud, a knife slicing into butter, or a child at play) and a specific dance element (such as an explosive quality or percussive rhythms). The phrase must move in space (changing levels, locomotor, or winding around oneself). It is the other partner's job to focus his or her attention on only one specific aspect of the movement, such as the quality, the tempo, or the pathway. Immediately after the demonstrated phrase is concluded, the second partner responds with an improvised movement phrase that encompasses the chosen lens. The movements themselves do not need to be repeated verbatim. Most probably, the phrases may “look” nothing alike. However, both participants should see evidence of the selected component, reinvented. This activity challenges dancers at any level to both narrow and refine their focus of attention in an active, embodied form.

Yoga instructor Cathy Jackson always begins her class with a metaphorical thread that leads into the day's practice. Many times, these metaphors are nature-related, such as focusing on the dirty, ugly mulch that helps the beautiful roses to blossom. Jackson asks her students to find calm and acceptance of the wormy, grimy grit in which they sometimes struggle within their practice, knowing that it will nourish the future blossoming of a beautiful rose. This can be a profound means for enacting transformative change in any discipline, including dance. Using Sewell's five skills in this metaphorical manner has the potential to enlighten a student about his or her own body in a way that analytical or narrative means cannot. This is because Sewell's skills of perception can translate to transformative “seeing” in any domain or discipline.

For example, skill number two—perceiving relationships, contexts, and interfaces—refers to perceiving the relationship between things anew instead of perceiving everything in the world as separate entities. It is a relational view, rather than an idealist, hierarchical view. This can be metaphorically applied to the moving, dancing body in a learning context. Students could explore duet improvisations with the idea that the product needs to be not the steps themselves, but the quality and content of the interaction between the individuals, interpreted through space, energy, and time. Specifically, each pair would come up with one way that this relational view manifests itself, such as how gravity can be used either to stabilize or destabilize a structure (things or individuals), or in the dynamics of giving and receiving weight and how that incites working interdependently. Once the pairs have decided on such a system of relations,



Photo by Peter Gornault; dancer: Julie Rothschild

Exploring creative-based avenues within the technique class provides a tool for “tuning in” to what the body's voice may wish to express.

they then improvise, creating a study that exemplifies their concepts. Undoubtedly, this process will help the student to re-perceive the familiar, bringing about a discovery of new movement possibilities and a new understanding of bodies working together.

Listening Through the Creative Process

The purpose of including this component is to acknowledge that a dancer's technical training should include opportunities to hone his or her creative skills. Martha Eddy, a Laban Movement analyst and Body-Mind Centering practitioner and educator, eschews the traditional structure of a technique class, stating that “The dancers' instruments, their sensitive bodies, should be developed to express and communicate their internal motivation” (Shapiro, 1998, p. 56). The purpose of exploring creative-based avenues within the technique class is not to make choreographers within the technique class, but to offer a tool for “tuning in” to what the body's voice may wish to express; it is more of an opportunity to create in the moment. Eddy stated, “...even the simplest movement should convey something about the internal feelings and thoughts of the mover” (p. 56). Creative listening is a form of body listening. The dancer must listen closely to his or her own movement preferences and subtleties, and to his or her unique and unperturbed interpretation of possibility as it peels out of each present instant. Only through time spent “self-listening” rather than just “other-imitating,” can a dancer develop into an individual, well-rounded, performing artist.

Open exercises with simple yet direct guidance can jumpstart dance students on this path. Technique classes usually culminate in locomotor combinations or long phrases that are continued from class to class. But technique class can also devote a small but consistent period of time to honoring the creative voice. For example, teachers can use these

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locomotor or culminating center-floor combinations as a springboard for creative explorations. Students can choose a featured quality or skill from the combination in class on which to focus. From there, they can create a short movement that essentializes that component and use it as the primary vehicle for an improvisatory study. Their choice could arise from the horizontal momentum of a jump, a floating quality in a particular port de bras, or the emphasis of the external leg rotation in the supporting leg of a suspension turn. This strategically combines technical work with the individual voice.

Another idea is to simply allow students to infuse a given combination from class with their own phrasing, quality, timing, and pathway changes. It is like putting their signature on a given phrase. They can choose a particular lens with which to change the phrase, such as changing the viscosity of the space or the overall speed; or they may just “play” with the phrase until it evolves into a new interpretation. This exercise works well in pairs of students who construct a “duet” from each other’s individual studies. They can selectively trade movements and include several instances of unison movement. It is valuable to witness the variety of interpretations that students create and to include a group discussion of the whole experience, even if it is brief.

Conclusion

Many of the practices mentioned in this article are currently being used by many dance teachers, though they are not necessarily thought of as a collective unit. Furthermore, many of these concepts are not always delivered with an emphasis on awareness and sensation from the first-person perspective. Focusing on breath, for example, by simply telling students when and where to breathe in a movement combination is helpful, but does not necessarily facilitate a somatic approach. Through these five categories, a body-listening approach focuses more on discovery and less on imitation, pairing first-person experience with informed knowledge of the body. The thread that traditionally ties a technique class together—technical vocabulary, skills through a warm-up, and center-floor and locomotor movements—manifests kinesthetic awareness and discovery as a beneficial side-effect rather than a focus unto itself. This discussion implicitly suggests a format where technical vocabulary and skills are developed within the context of somatic discovery.

Since choreography by renowned visionaries no longer serves as the primary component of dance technique classes, a more foundational approach may be evolving, and somatics plays a huge role in this changing scene (Fortin, 1998). Identifying body-listening categories is one step toward establishing the importance of a somatic approach within dance pedagogy. The body-listening approach targeted in this discussion serves as a guide rather than a codification.

Beyond focusing on the steps or parts of the class, body-listening uses a concept-based approach that transcends techniques and vocabularies. It is one of many tangible ways to bring somatic perspectives and strategies into the technique class and integrate them with the very definition of technical training.

Developing somatic acuity and intelligence that will serve the student both within and beyond the dance classroom is not only an appropriate mission for dance education, it is a vital one. Starting from the essential meaning of *body listening*, dance educators need to continue to devise effective tools that will harness this way of teaching and learning in the dance technique class.

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