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Body Knows, Spirit Dances: Somatic approaches in cross cultural dance exchange

Lauren Evans and Marin Roper, Dance

In June 2018, I accompanied three other undergraduate Dance major students and my mentor to Bangalore, India where we observed, trained with and learned choreography from five Indian dance artists over a two-week period to learn and teach autobiographical solos reflecting a personal ‘search for the sacred.’

Another student and I traveled to one of the assigned studios daily and had six 3-4-hour rehearsals. Following each dance rehearsal, the somatic lens of Laban Movement Analysis and Bartenieff Fundamentals (a somatic-based model of movement observation and analysis widely used in the field of dance) was used to analyze, describe and make meaning of perceived physical sensations in the body. Through reflective journaling, I reflected on imagery, cues and metaphors used by the choreographer in the studio and described associated meaning within the physical sensations perceived inside my own body during the rehearsal process. These meanings reflected on imagery, cues, and metaphors used by the choreographer. That information was discussed, compared and contextualized through choreographer interviews that happened the following day before movement rehearsals began.

Through this 3-part methodology including learning dance choreography, identifying and describing physical sensations through reflective journaling, then contextualizing those sensations through interviewing choreographers, I sought to articulate teaching and learning methods that can not only lead to more authentic dance performance, but can also lead to greater understanding between teachers and students of diverse cultural and spiritual backgrounds. As I begin my student teaching in January 2019, I am cultivating my pedagogy and curriculum around these learning methods that will help create more authentic and empathetic students.

Our group met daily during, and weekly throughout the summer, to discuss our experiences and find unifying themes. We presented our methodology in a workshop at the Somatic Conference and Performance Festival (Geneva, NY, July 2018) and in a lecture-demonstration at Brigham Young University. Although each of our individual experiences varied, some unifying themes that seemed to weave in and out of all our experiences included resistance, movement and ideology, and empathy. Personally, I found myself drawn to the idea of empathy and how embodying the lived experiences of another person through movement helps us connect to them empathetically.

From this research, I learned as a dancer how to shift movement from simple understanding to becoming meaningful for me. As a choreographer, I learned it is vital that I find connections to dancers’ past lived experiences to movement, so the movement becomes a shared empathetic experience between choreographer and dancer to shift it into deeper meaning. And through this shared empathetic embodiment, choreography becomes more meaningful.

One of the applications I can apply to guide a more authentic, embodied approach to learning choreography is to identify, define and contextualize the felt physical sensations within learned choreography. Rather than asking the choreographer, What does this mean?, I might begin by asking myself, “What associations do I attach to the physical sensations I perceive in my body?” (Such sensations might include the binding and freeing of muscular tension, the opening and closing shaping of the body, the flexing and extending of joints, my breath phrasing, etc.) Where else in my life do I experience similar sensations? What memories are associated with such sensations?” This type of
embodied knowledge might serve to spark more authentic conversations between performer and choreographer about choreography’s ‘meaning,’ or ‘significance.’

Overall this project has opened my eyes to ways I can guide future students through a more empathetic and culturally shared and significant pedagogy that will help them transform to contributing members of society. As a dancer and choreographer I’ve learned ways that will help make learned movement more meaningful and ways I can make movement meaningful for dancers that I’m teaching my choreography to.

Figure 1 – The four undergraduate Dance major students (including me), our faculty mentor, Marin Roper, and our five Indian dance artists we collaborated with on this project in Bangalore, India.
Figure 2 – The dance artist I personally worked with, Mirra, and I.

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