Dance in the 21st century - Early Careers Symposium – Bedford University

Doing dancing…Being in dance

Undoing the danced Body – Feldenkrais and awareness in Motion

Man’s life is a continuous process, and the improvement is needed in the quality of the process…..The more clearly the fundamentals of the process are understood, the greater will be the achievements. (Feldenkrais)

Today I’m going to share my current research which involves teaching first year dance students at Chichester University and has been an ongoing part of my artistic and pedagogic research for the past 6 years. I will explain how and why I have incorporated Feldenkrais lessons into their dance practice and how this has had an impact on my learning and teaching as well as relating experiences from some of the participants.

I have been looking at the Feldenkrais Method as a way to undo the danced body and enhance awareness in motion, recognising and letting go of the known body, the practiced/automatic/unnoticed body and allowing movement back in through improvisation, to a place that is more open, intriguing and unknown.

Not necessarily out with the old and in with the new but offering the choice to experience learning in a new way, to experience being less confined, restricted and held back by what is known…a way to get to know the potential of the dancer or person yet to be discovered.

Last year I completed my training in the Feldenkrais Method, a process that taught me how to listen, learn and for the first time become involved in, engaged with and a part of my own experience. This led me to question, where I had been in the prior years of my dancing life and what it was about Feldenkrais that allowed me to become known to myself.

In the process of the 4 year training what I thought I’d lost, was found…a dance pathway that I had begun to question, that had become unclear, absent and empty, became more clear, present and full, gaining power and meaning…new sensations, new possibilities, new life.

Without question I had to share this potential for learning from the method with those I teach and have called this evolving practice Awareness in Motion. The development of this practice continues to grow as I consider how Feldenkrais lessons can best support the dancer in the early stages of their training, how much to challenge and disrupt when their process is likely to be a matter of weeks rather than years. My intention is to expose aspiring dancers to their own potential, to experience what it feels like to move, rather than hanging on to what it looks like; to shatter the mirror image and take part in the evolving self-image and to encourage engaging with the process of moving and living as it happens.

With a clear understanding that my experience can never be the same as another’s, I believe strongly that this way of working can encourage the possibilities of self as learner, self as knower, self as mover and self as responsible for personal growth and practice.

When a student or anyone for that matter, is given the opportunity to feel their body in motion, to get to know themselves through trusting in the unknown, I propose that thinking changes, learning and ownership takes place… informed by a history of life and movement but not confined by its rules.

pp2 – thinker

With much of our learning we are asked to think and channel this thinking in our heads, cognitive, linear and often repetitive, rather than physical and circular, without structure. We can get caught in the trap of learning one way and become programmed to function only in that way…we become what we know and fear what we don’t. Therefore our physical body can become held by mental patterns, having fixed ideas about what we can and can’t do. The Feldenkrais Method, to use a current term, very gently ‘hacks’ into the nervous system to undo, challenge, shake up and re wire, allowing the body to become known as well as knowing and offers the choice to get away from the dominant mind.

To do this, learning and experiencing need to be brought into the present moment. It’s not about what you have known, learnt and experienced but knowing that you are knowing, learning and experiencing right her, right now…..experiencing your experience.

Feldenkrais offers the possibility of re-learning what it is to move, by simply going back to where it all began, before being shaped by life patterns…referring often to the innocence of a baby where everything is for the first time….discovering hands that respond to my direction, what it takes to reach, to roll, to crawl, walk, run and jump and the pure elation of those achievements

pp3 –babies

It is in our formative years where most of our learning takes place. Much of our time is spent on our backs, tummy’s, sitting and crawling before we find walking, running, jumping.

Many Feldenkrais lessons take place on the back, but also on the front, side, sitting and standing, and take us back to the beginnings of our moving where we had so much choice…to remember how it felt to be curious about the body, every physical moment giving sensory feedback that informed and fed and its newness was felt and noticed.

So our experience is informed by our experience and evolves with it and therefore can be altered by what we choose to add

In a dance class students often dance the teacher, for the teacher, what they see, rather than what they feel, almost trying to become like another, rather than to learning to become themselves. Often those that arrive at Chichester reveal that they have danced all of their lives….and I’m sure know very well what moving looks like but I wonder whether they have really experienced what it feels like.

My intention with this work is to give feeling back to movement and thereby enhance the experience of moving for the dancer.

But to enable their dancing to reach this level requires stripping back to, as Elizabeth Beringer describes…bare bones action,

pp4– skeletons

before muscular holding and habit took over, to understand how the simplicity of the structure and function of the moving skeleton can support and connect the whole body in motion with ease and efficiency.

I did wonder when devising this work whether teaching first year undergraduates was a good place to begin…would they be ready to engage with this kind of practice…..I now believe that the earlier the better, as the longer we experience what is known, the deeper patterns furrow,

pp5 – furrowed land

holding becomes tighter, self-image can stagnate and growing, learning and the potential for change and development can cease.

**So what is the Feldenkrais Method**

'**The aim is a body that is organised to move with minimum effort and maximum efficiency, not through muscular strength but increased consciousness of how it works.'**

Dr Moshe Feldenkrais                     (thepeacefulrunner.com)

Feldenkrais developed his practice by observing himself in motion, recognising that ‘no part of the body can be moved without all others being affected’ and wrote that he was ‘…far more absorbed in observing how (he) was doing a movement than (he) was interested in what the movement happened to be.’ (Doidge) He described his use of ‘…on going mental awareness of movement’ as a way ‘to give … feedback which would alter the functioning of his brain.’ It was this thinking that lead Doidge to describe Feldenkrais as one of the first neuro-plasticians. Feldenkrais insights have been reaffirmed by neuroscientist Michael Herzenich who showed that ‘…long term neuro-plastic change occurs most readily when a person….pays close attention while learning.’

Learning in the Feldenkrais method takes place as a result of moving slowly, as Doidge says ‘…slowness is the key to awareness and awareness is the key to learning’ (Doidge)

pp6 - tortoise

When the movement is small and slow, sensory distinctions can be made between movements and allow for mapping of the brain to be rewritten... slower movement leads to more subtle observation and map differentiation, so that more change is possible.

Reducing effort is another key principle in the method. The use of force Doidge explains is the opposite to awareness…’learning does not take place when we are straining… …compulsive effort leads to mindless, automatic movement that becomes habitual and unresponsive to changing situations.’

pp7 - zip

The concept of undoing is an aspect of the work that takes time to understand, feel and acknowledge, possibly not realising that change has happened for quite some time. It is not something to be done, it happens…most of us are unaware that we have patterns of moving and being that need to be or could be undone and have no idea how to do it or what may happen when undoing becomes undone.

Feldenkrais lessons therefore propose a challenge with the intention to disrupt, confront and expose habit and effort by returning to the simplicity of the bones and moving slowly. They also direct attention through listening, encourage you to replace judgment with curiosity and shift attention to the process of moving rather than the aim of trying to get somewhere.

Feldenkrais called his way of working ‘dancing with the brain’ (Doidge) which perfectly encapsulates my interest in the science of movement and the art of dance, how shifting patterns in the brain can inform and effect the body, enriching physical sensation and enlarging the concept of self in motion.

I believe the method gives back the sense of feeling that we can lose touch with, the ‘me’ in ‘I’… the sensation of moving into being, the first person experience, a present rather than an absent body.

Each lesson allows space and time to rest, breath and notice and usually takes place in silence, none of the above you generally associate with the conventional dance class and therefore a challenge for many dancers.

pp8 - water…breathing …moment of silence…

pp9 - stones

**My experience**

My early experiences of Feldenkrais exposed the kind of learner I was and also the trained dancer in me. I wanted to find an answer, to reach the end of a movement, to work really hard, but in time I realised how much I was missing in my eagerness to arrive at the end point. Gradually turning down the volume and reducing power, my body had time and space to notice subtleties of sound and movement, a felt connection and collaboration between mind and body, responsive, receptive and open to sensations and feelings that had become unfelt, unseen and unheard.

I slowly began to realise that this practice invited self-learning, self-knowing and self-acceptance.

**Student experience –**

I have worked with 3 groups of students for 6 weeks each and for 3 hours a week. In this time I have introduced them to the Feldenkrais method and played with some improvisatory tasks leading from the particular lessons chosen. This fed into a final score danced in small groups to share the accumulation of the process and their learning. (I’m currently in the middle of the final rotation of students)

The lessons chosen introduced the students to the basic structure of their bones, highlighting the spine, the shoulders and pelvis, the idea of pressing to transfer force from one part of the skeleton through to another, awareness of the feet and also seeing as a way to enlarge the volume of the body both internally and externally. All of the lessons except one began on the back.

The improvisatory tasks were each informed by what I thought to be the most important learning to take from each lesson

So, for example, after working with the spine, sensing both the front and the back of the bony structure I enhanced this practice by expanding these sensations to moving with attention to the front and back surfaces of the whole body.

A lesson called 4 corners focusses on the pelvis and shoulders (indirectly encouraging movement in the spine) and involves pressing and lifting towards and away from the floor which we then explored as a way to move to find standing and then working with a partner

Transference through the skeleton, led to initiate and respond, receive and follow, from one part of the body to another.

Attention to the feet led to balance and falling and seeing led to seeing … through bone and cells as well as eyes (here incorporating some principles from working with choreographer Deborah Hay)

Each group of students were asked to fill in a feedback sheet in which I asked questions to find out more about their experience, those that they may not have wanted to share in class. With this the aim was to learn more from them about the potential of the method and continue to fine tune and adjust my practice of teaching in this way.

pp10 - ref to feedback sheets

Many of the students found the most overwhelming challenge of a Feldenkrais lesson was to be still and quiet. This is not a part of contemporary life or something that is learnt through contemporary dance classes and therefore very new for the majority. Life is noisy, fast and constantly moving….I often equate it to the passing scenery you attempt to capture as you rush by on a train. On these occasions I often look to the sky to maintain a sense of stillness in the sensory chaos of the everyday.

pp11 - me - still

Working with external stillness and quiet with practice allows for the internal volume to reduce and thereby allowing the unheard to speak. Stillness heightens attention which Eckhart Tolle describes ‘…joins the perceiver to the perceived in a unifying field of awareness. It is the healer of separation.’ (Stillness Speaks)

**There were moments in each lesson where the stillness and silence pierced the space….** a quality that can be overpowering in its intensity

pp12 - space

Here I would allow the students to linger in that unique listening and learning place… when the nervous system settles, becomes quiet and less busy.

This required patience from both myself and the students, to allow **attention** the opportunity to expand and absorb…. ….The change in the studio space is quite something, trusting, vulnerable, innocent…like a baby…the uniqueness of making contact with the nervous system, knowing that engagement from that point has changed.

It is important to let everyone hear it and know that they are hearing it and learn from it, one step closer to the universe within…

This however can be a disorientating experience, uncomfortable and unsettling as it tends to be the beginning of recognising self and feelings, which are often aspects of our living and being that can get smothered by doing and life.

It is here that letting go begins... doors open to new possibilities…as Almaas says…’defenses dissolve….walls come down…..vulnerability becomes the door to intimacy, to being ourselves, to being real, to being where we are…’ (Almaas)

pp13 – wall

So

pp14 – dissolving into newness

With the idea of defences being dissolved…habits questioned and noticed, I transfer this new awareness into motion to feed directly into the process of improvisation – learning about self from the experience that arrives from an unknown place and in my mind is a natural progression for the dancers learning. As much as I value the purity of Feldenkrais lessons alone and often leave the dancer to experience that, there is something unique in the learning potential from a lesson within a dance practice. It noticeably supports the student’s exploration away from habitual dance patterns and invites the possibility of feeling what happens as they move into newness. Thus providing a new bridge into creative practice….

pp15 - Bridge

Engagement with the improvised tasks has a new dimension…the dancers allow their bodies to think rather than just following with their heads. Intention and sensation become part of their moving experience and for some, they have a new understanding as to why they are in the space, catching a glimpse of who they are….the process of ‘selfing’ (Beringer) beginning to unfold…

I recognise that I have only worked with students on a short 6 week intensive course to introduce them to the possibilities of these practices, for some the whole 6 weeks as you can imagine, has been a real struggle and for some less so but on the whole by week 4 of the process change happens, experience becomes more felt and attention to the practice deepens. Many students expressed in both movement and sometimes words, a sense of feeling more secure with the unknown and excited by what they were experiencing, noticing change and a difference in their understanding of who they are and how their bodies feel and function.

So, to round up…my Feldenkrais learning has had a huge impact on my work as a dance artist and dance teacher but for today’s purposes I will highlight the changes and challenges encountered so far in my pedagogic approach

1. Although working more with improvisation, I am still developing my technique classes that have a more conventional format but with greater interest in how material is happening, involving more awareness in where movement is coming from to encourage consciousness of self in motion. By incorporating cellular listening and the idea of the structure, function and architecture of the bones, I encourage muscular softening and melting to suggest a different way of moving which may result in less stress on the body, ease, efficiency and returning to the pleasure of moving which as I found, can so easily get lost.
2. Learning how to inspire and stimulate a dance student to make the shift from known steps to something that is unknown and unfamiliar and how to simplify the learning process to engage with those that are unsure, insecure and generally a bit uninterested.
3. Learning how to do less physically in terms of demonstration to allow the dancers to find themselves rather than me. Realising how long the learning process can take and the intricacy of rewiring the brain and nervous system.
4. Letting go of wanting to give too much and accepting that I can’t do the learning for the student
5. Allow space and time
6. Not giving in to the student’s need to move….waiting longer for next moment as the silence and stillness is where learning is taking place….Trusting in the process

pp16 – process

1. One idea is enough…giving more doesn’t mean they’re learning more
2. Not giving in to entertaining, to make fun to keep student attention…this is part of their learning and mine also – to listen and practice noticing, even when you may feel unsure
3. Knowing that it will provoke more questions than answers and sometimes there are no answers.
4. Knowing that change may not happen…. I am offering choice, awareness and the potential to grow in a way that is hard to put into words and takes time

This work has given me the opportunity to become a better teacher, challenging my notions of what teaching is, how doing less can achieve more!!!

**In conclusion**

I have never felt more passionate about putting the **being** back into human, the **human** back into dancing, allowing

Stillness to feel movement

Slowness to know fast

Smallness to feel big

Silence to hear sound

Encouraging bone over muscle

Being-ness and doing less

Self-discovery is an essential part of learning and has to happen by the self and therefore in this work I am attempting to provide an environment for people to discover and get to know the person inside their skin, the bones that carry them, the breath that fills them… Providing an open space to allow knowing to arrive

I would like to end with two quotes that have supported me on my journey through this process, one from Steve Paxton….

**‘…the work is the teacher…’ (Steve Paxton)**

And one from Scott Clarke

**‘…the end of the lesson is where learning begins…’ (Scott Clarke)**

pp17 – skeleton walking

**Thank you**

**Any questions**

pp18 – Bibliography

pp19 - Live, breathe, experience and discover