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Moving Without Moving: An Exploration of Somatic Learning as a Transformative Process in Adult Education

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Keywords: Somatic learning, movement, martial arts, non-western perspective, images, metaphors, transfer of learning, social construction.

Abstract: This study explores the impact of body movement and vocalization as a transformative and creative somatic learning process. It investigates the ways Shintaido, an expressive combination of martial arts and moving meditation, is transferred by adult martial arts practitioners into their everyday life experiences.

Introduction

The process of continuous inquiry is embedded in somatic learning and in action research. This same process of discovery, non-neutrality of the observer, and exploration of the unknown are elemental aspects of body movement. Somatic learning in adult education provides a cyclical framework for learning and reflection, and it serves as a deep well into learning and knowing in adult education. The movement experience provides an organic and non-rational way to tap into the body and mind's wisdom to engage in investigation and to envision the inquiry process in a unique and expressive way. This study explored the transformative and creative learning process using body movement and vocalization and it investigated the ways this somatic learning process is transferred into everyday experiences by adult practitioners.

This research study investigated the experiences of Shintaido practitioners. Shintaido is a martial arts and body movement form related to Aikido that translates as - A New Body Way. Founded in the 1960's by Hiroyuki Aoki with a group of Japanese martial artists, musicians, actors, visual artists and other practitioners, it is an expressive combination of martial arts and body movement that has been called "moving meditation." It provokes in the practitioners a sense of openness, enhanced perspective, as well as a challenge to go beyond imposed limits and conventional approaches to knowing and learning about the life energy in the body, nature and all that surrounds us.

Theoretical perspective

This research focuses on social constructivism as the main theoretical perspective. As recipients of a socially constructed set of codes or language, we are constantly embarking in critical reflection of our learning, not just what is learned, but how and for what purpose we learn. The vessel for social knowledge is embedded in historical and social forces that emerge over time.

By resisting and in turn socially constructing our own set of codes and language through dialogue and action, and through the creation of social, cultural institutions, people can promote a sustainable self identity, manage a more complex view of themselves, and participate as active citizens in social change. The challenge is to be able to generate new meanings through the uses of metaphor and imagery that can mobilize and support beliefs and hopes for a better life. Some

codes serve a system of privilege, while other codes resist such attempts at control and at marginalization of a community's own stories, by the exploration and the celebration of their stories. Storytelling enriches the imagination and serves as a vehicle for cultural survival.

We can tell stories and create positive images therefore constructing an expanded sense of self and the world through a repertoire of body movement and posture. This process translates into a way of being in the world that enhances relationships with others and with nature, and encourages fluidity and reflection in a way that cannot be attained through intellectual process alone. (Lawrence, 2005).

Maxine Greene (1995) emphasizes the need to provide an alternative perspective through the use of our imagination and metaphor as a way to create new meaning in situations where the current paradigm forces us to conform with the status quo and the codes that perpetuate it. Alternative ways of learning and imagining enriches the way we view the world around us. Shintaido provides a rich source of metaphors and positive images that translates into everyday action.

Randee Lipson Lawrence (2005) writes, "Incorporating various arts forms—poetry, drama, music, literature, visual art, and others—into the practice of adult education provides tremendous potential to enhance both teaching and learning. For these learning opportunities to occur, educators need to take risks by venturing out of their comfort zones and in turn encourage their students to take similar risks" (p. 10). Shintaido practitioners use body movement as a tool for learning how to learn, and as an encouragement to include somatic dialogue between learners and with the learning community as a whole.

By exploring learning in alternative ways, we are resisting the educational mainstream's tendency towards a limited way of thinking and learning. Therefore, the act of opening and liberating multiple ways of learning and engaging in the exploration of knowledge through body movement, ventures beyond our limits in the way we chose to learn and the way we chose to act as engaged citizens and adult learners.

Methodology

This ethnographic research focused on a group of ten Shintaido Martial Arts practitioners. Open-ended questions were used to engage participants in a conversation about how and in what ways did their somatic learning provided a rich space for learning and building a community of practice. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. Some information was acquired through participant observation and field notes. The guiding questions for this research are: How has Shintaido movement translated into practitioner's everyday life experiences? How does movement engages learning and reflection?

Findings

Shintaido is an alternative way of tapping the wisdom of knowing and learning through liberation and expansion of the body and the mind. Together with educational research, this expressive movement is a kind of somatic exploration into multiple ways of knowing using the intelligence of our bodies, voice and breath to engage in inquiry through self-discovery, by reconnecting with community and imagining possibilities beyond our conditioned scope.

Participants felt very strongly that the practice of Shintaido helped them open up the sky of their minds. The physical and mental discipline of the body movement and the experiences of going beyond their physical limits allowed them to see how the mind constructed barriers that

limited their performance. Kumite, or pair practice focuses not on defeating the opponent but on opening up their center so that they can both move without moving, both can give and receive effortlessly. Kumite is an essential part of the Shintaido community of practice whether training with the Bokuto, sword technique, Tenshingoso, the five fundamental movements, or pushing beyond limits with Eiko Dai Kumite while running at top speed and moving as if cutting the sky with your whole being. This experience translated into an understanding of relationships and a curiosity to explore the wisdom of the body until attaining complete unification called Kokyu, a vital, living energy.

According to Lawrence (2005), the opening up of intellectual expression is possible by incorporating “other ways of knowing into our teaching practice, as expressed through metaphor, dance, poetry, visual art, or dramatic expression, we draw on the effective, somatic, and spiritual domains. (p. 4). The community of practice formed by the interaction of Shintaido participants supports the enrichment of dialogue, the sharing of common experiences and the unifying call to use their practice for the improvement of a larger common good. The act of giving one-self and giving fully was a powerful theme that permeated the interviews.

The sense of Kumite, partner exchange, from the dojo to the street or work, was a image that many participants used to refers to the building of relationships, and their ability to choose to receive or give by acting as a grounding force with conflicts and with every day life. Mark, who is a hospice social worker, says, “there is a lot of partner exchange that goes on sitting with people, talking, listening, being in silence. The idea of leading and following and trying to be sensitive to where to go with the client.” Mark related an experience with a 94-year-old patient who was terminally ill. They would sit together and hold hands. His hands were very grounding to her. He said, “she told me that. Sometimes we talk or I initiate a conversation. It flows like life, a wakame (seaweed) feeling where you don’t care at certain point who is the wave and who is the fish. You are just in the moment.” Mark finds his experience with Shintaido useful as an image that is applicable to his work and as a way to be in relationship with others. Bob, a foreman, uses Shintaido Kumite to help him get centered and maintain an awareness of his surrounding, particularly on the construction site. He says, “when I do work as a foreman, I use it as how to get people to do things. It becomes a Kumite because you have to deal with them verbally.”

Mary, on the other hand, describes her use of metaphor and imagery as a way to walk along side her patients who are seriously ill. Kaishoken (open hand) and Musoken (soft hand) are two techniques that engage an opponent. The techniques were metaphors used by Mary as a “means to cut into their world, into their pain and into what they are experiencing, so I in turn can be beside them.” She continues, “I need to cut away, release, get rid of, so I can be fully present.” The creation of a ritual space in order to come closer to clients was attainable by Mary through her positive imagery and her understanding of the need of the client and his family. Cooperrider (2001) explains that this affirmative competence is an imagery technique acquired through discipline and practice that athletes chose when they want to increase their performance. He writes, “paradoxically, while most in our culture seem to operate on the assumption that elimination of failures (negative self-monitoring) will improve performance, exactly the opposite holds true, at least when it comes to learning new tasks” (Chapter 2, p. 13). Mary says, “to me Shintaido really ends up being the place where I can use metaphors to daily life, and to some extent to see something in a new perspective and maybe gain a better understanding.” She envisioned an opening by the image of cutting through in order to competently care for her clients as well as to care for herself.

The participant's responses gravitated to the creation of openness in relationships and a sense of giving and receiving when interacting with people or nature. To them, the concept of Kyosei no Eichichi or holistic wisdom lies in the body and in the Eastern philosophical metaphor of Ten-Chi-Jin which situates humanity in the axis of heaven and earth. This concept, according to Michael Thompson (1987), a Shintaido senior instructor, is a major goal of keiko (practice), "to realize the vertical Ten-Chi-Jin relationship in our bodies and to express the result in technique, movement and kumite." He concludes by emphasizing the importance of the Shintaido community and the members whose experiences serve as a laboratory for practice of Shintaido's basic philosophy: "love your God and your neighbor as yourself" (Thompson, 1987, p. 46).

Implications for Adult Theory and Practice

Alternative forms of expression, in addition to cognitive modes, provide opportunities to expand the learner's intellectual curiosity and focus by harvesting the metaphors and images that creative activity can inspire. Shintaido practitioners showed a keen ability to transfer their somatic awareness to daily life situations. They were able to use imagery and metaphor as key elements of affirmative competence that integrated their personal values with the principles of their martial arts practice resulting in positive actions or choices in their communities and at their workplace. McHugh described body movement as an opportunity to "explore and increase your range of choices for feeling, perceiving, thinking and sensing as you move from self-consciousness to self-awareness" (2005, p. 1).

By opening to the improvisational nature of kumite or partner exchange, and to other core martial arts movements, Shintaidoist improved their personal and work relationships, became more open in their learning habits, more fluid and grounded in their engagements, more reflective and expansive in their choices, and more aware of their bodies as a source of holistic intelligence capable of guiding their path through their multi-cultural lifeworld. Their ability to imagine and express the non-linear and non-Western concept of Ten-Chi-Jin through movement, allowed them to create an active body and an awareness of their inner energy that supported their giving and receiving in their daily life practice. The Shintaido practitioners benefited from learning experientially, engaging in reflective moments to discuss their practice, and being able to transfer their experiences to real life situations. By embedding a set of core movements in their practice, they facilitated an understanding of affirmative competencies resulting in positive attitude and an openness to listen to the body's ability to learn, give and receive.

Aoki Sensei (1992), the founder of Shintaido, wrote, "creativity is not the exclusive province of artists and artistic expression. If we stop the automatic acts of daily life, surrendering yesterday's happenings and separating ourselves from the old self of one day ago, through the act of our will we will discover a new life of continuing satori (understanding). By pursuing a new mind we will approach our real self, step by step, and discover the deeper meaning of a truly creative life" (p. 61). There is much more to be learned from this somatic process and about the learning that goes on in movement instruction.

An exploration of action research using Shintaido movements

I have found that the cyclical Shintaido practice called Tenshingoso can be utilized as a platform for constructing a process of inquiry for a research study or in developing projects geared for personal or organizational change. It is a process similar to action research. Tenshingoso, a core Shintaido movement meaning the five heavenly movements, provided a

foundation to interpreting each stage of the five distinct phases of the Cycles of Inquiry design I've created. This basic movement served as a container for meaning making in the same way a text requires the infusion of experiences by the reader and her imagination in order to come alive. Shintaido practitioners use somatic learning as a way to inquire about themselves and those around them. They use the movement process as a vessel for learning.

The five Tenshingoso movements and vocal sound associations, A, E, I, O and Um, can be used as stages for inquiry. These movements are core phases in a research process with each phase representing a cycle that builds upon the previous phase.

The Movement

Tenshingoso is a circular movement made with the arms that starts in a meditative pose with hands gently clasped in front of the body. The hands and arms open wide with fingers fanning out. Arms reach behind and rise above the head pointing to the sky. Then, the hands "slice the sky" while coming down to waist level. The hands and arms push forward and reach out over the horizon. They circle above the head towards the back and with palms facing down the arms move forward reaching the horizon again. The hands return to the meditative position where they started at the beginning. The cyclical nature of the movement represents in non-verbal terms the five expressions (Goso) of universal truth (Tenshin).

The Cycles of Inquiry

The action research process that I have developed, the Cycles of Inquiry, consists of five phases: **Origin, Conception, Learning, Knowing and Doing**. I've connected each Tenshingoso movement phase and sound with a research stage, for example the sound of Um with Origin and A with Conception. I used the Tenshingoso movements as a metaphor to help me conceptualize each phase of this research process.

UM - Origin: Every person sees reality with his or her particular lens; there is no such thing as a neutral observer. I begin to sort my origin (i.e., race, class, culture, life experiences) by settling into my place of stillness or "UM," focusing on the self with questions such as – Who am I? What is my story? What are my significant memories? How do those remembrances influence my life today? This stage is about going back to the source. Origin is a place of discovery.

A - Conception: Conception is about pursuing one's dreams and asking sustaining, life-giving questions. The reality people create is preceded by the questions asked. I experienced the "A" in Tenshingoso as a creative opening and a chance to envision my dream for this research. What questions did I need to ask? By reaching behind me and by trusting in my past experiences and knowledge, I could look upwards into the creative heaven for inspiration on ways to explore the world.

E - Learning: In research, this step comes about in the form of interviews, conversations, focus groups, observations, field notes and publications. I am reaching out and exploring the world by using the research design created in the conception phase. The participants are learning about my purpose and intention in pursuing research and in turn, I am learning about them. This is a significant phase where relationship plays an important role.

I – Knowing: After I reach out and explore the world by asking questions, engaging in inquiry, and connecting outward, I bring back that information for evaluation and reflection. In a matter of speaking, I reach out in “I” to expand and enrich my interpretation of what I have learned. This type of initiative and collective knowledge helps me regain a connection with reality, and was repeated several times in my research until I was satisfied with my findings. The cycle of “E” and “I” can repeat as many times as it is needed to gain a deeper understanding of what has being inquired about and to begin to design a course for leadership and action.

O – Doing: This research phase unifies what has been learned from critical reflection and dialogue on the themes and topics of the findings, and brings them back to creative action. In Tenshingos, I reach up with “O” embracing all that I know and then acting on that knowledge to make an impact on the world by giving back to it. This is a circular process that touches on all previous phases. I am using what I know to make an impact in society through social and organizational change. Doing is about realizing a destiny through leadership in action that brings about change.

The Mirror

Tenshingos is a mirror to the action research process involving both the researcher and participants in the cycle of inquiry and action. Tenshingos kumite or partner practice could be said to have this quality, as everyone involved is an active part of the research process and where participants give and take. By immersing myself in learning through the phases of investigating my origin, discovering and conceiving my dreams, learning from inquiry, critically reflecting on the deeper knowledge of what I am studying, and finally, acting on that knowledge, I can make an impact in an organization, a relationship, and the world.

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