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Tara L. Horst
Shippensburg University

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The Body in Adult Education: Introducing a Somatic Learning Model

Tara L. Horst
Shippensburg University

Keywords: somatic learning, body, women, managers

Abstract: This paper explores the nature and definitions of somatic knowing, presents a model explaining the aspects of somatic learning, and suggests how somatic learning/ knowing can be incorporated into the practice of adult education.

Definitions and the Nature of Somatic Knowing

Somatic learning is *felt* by the body, and defining such knowing in rationale terms has limited not only the understanding of somatic education but also its development. While the range of learning that is classified within somatic learning is broad and interpreted differently, it is the body itself that continuously emerges as a multi-faceted force for making meaning of our experience. While the literature regarding somatic learning at first glance appears minimal, a deeper investigation revealed that it takes on many forms in various disciplines. Matthews (1998) describes somatic knowing as an “embodied experience of being and doing” (¶ 4). Consider from this definition that to embody something is to give it a body, and therefore, embodied learning literally means giving a body to learning.

The body as a medium for understanding society and culture is also discussed by Brockman (2001) who uses a multicultural and postmodern lens for viewing somatic knowing, which he describes as knowledge known by the body through physical sensation. He believes that somatic knowing offers a fundamental knowledge source that can aid educators and philosophers in sorting “the cultural goods from the cultural evils” (¶ 19). Like Matthews (1998), Brockman (2001) views the exclusion of somatic knowing in favor of cultural-linguistic dimensions as extremely problematic. A cultural-linguistic approach transmits knowledge through a lens emphasizing the customs, beliefs, and social norms combined with speech patterns of a particular race, religious or social group. By assuming knowledge to be historical, cultural, and linguistic in nature it implies that groups of different cultures are unable to learn from one another. In other words, if knowledge is constructed culturally and linguistically, then it may not be transferable to other cultural and linguistic systems. Brockman also differentiates somatic knowledge as being received from within the individual and cultural knowledge as being received from without the individual. Consider someone who has just been diagnosed with a disease. The individual can research the condition and talk to others with the same disease, which is a way of acquiring cultural-linguistic knowledge. However, until the individual begins to experience the symptoms of his or her disease, the knowledge he or she has comes from outside the body. Going through the disease and experiencing it within the body becomes a somatic experience. The knowledge gained from pain, discomfort, or fatigue then becomes more tangible and concrete than the knowledge received from others. Because somatic knowledge is experienced directly, it can offer a dimension of learning that is common to all cultural contexts.

Somatic learning often occurs in experiential learning, where the learner becomes an active participant in the knowledge acquisition process through activities like role plays and discussion. Clark (2001) generalized somatic learning even more, describing it as “how we learn

from our bodily experience” (§ 3). She gives the example of how often stress manifests itself in our body before our mind recognizes the situation as an example of we discount the body’s message until our minds can define it. While these two definitions sound similar, consider these active interpretations of somatic learning such as artistic, emotional, and physical endeavors (Clark, 2001; Crawford, 1998), tacit learning (Durrance, 1998), dance (Fortin, 1998), and ballet (Wainwright, Williams, & Turner, 2006). Another way of understanding somatic learning is as a “conscious embodiment,” which can be expressed through experiential techniques such as those used to study power relations (Crowdes, 2000). As a sociology professor, Crowdes described conscious embodiment as “an integrity of mind, body, and action accompanied by some awareness in the broader social context” (p. 27). Conscious embodiment includes but is not limited to body posture, style, emotions, and simple body actions (Crowdes, 2000). Likewise, the research of Wainwright, Williams, and Turner (2006) explores the concepts of habitus, physical capital, and cultural capital as explained by Pierre Bourdieu through an ethnographic study of the body within the context of professional classical ballet.

In response to the variety of definitions of somatic learning, a framework developed that encompasses four domains, each being somatic in nature. The framework resulted from reviewing the literature and finding that “somatic” learning was often represented under other terminology.

Four Types of Somatic Learning

As a result of the various definitions that indicate somatic learning can be identified as bodily learning experiences through movement, each of the five senses, emotions, and/or our spirituality, a model emerged interconnecting four areas of somatic learning as pathways for creating meaning. The model offers a visual explanation of how somatic learning often acts as an umbrella for many types of bodily learning and that each of the four domains also often intersects with one another. Because of the variety and disparity between the definitions of somatic learning, this model provides an inclusive representation of the aspects of learning through the body. Each domain, represented by a circle, overlaps to depict the practical way each aspect of somatic learning tend to intersect. The four main areas of somatic learning are kinesthetic, sensory, affective, and spiritual.

Through an action research study I conducted with 15 women managers, yoga was used as a pathway to somatic learning. The physical aspect of yoga practice is a particularly appropriate match for fostering a somatic approach to teaching and learning because it is based on the belief that the body and breath are connected in the mind. By controlling the breath and holding the body in steady poses, yoga creates harmony. Therefore, yoga serves as a means to balance and harmonize the body, mind, and emotions and allow withdrawal from the chaos of the world and find a quiet space within, which is especially helpful for fostering reflection. Yoga can be practiced within a group, but is a very individualized practice, which corresponds well to the fact that learners will have varying levels of awareness and understanding about connecting somatic learning to the subject matter being taught. The women

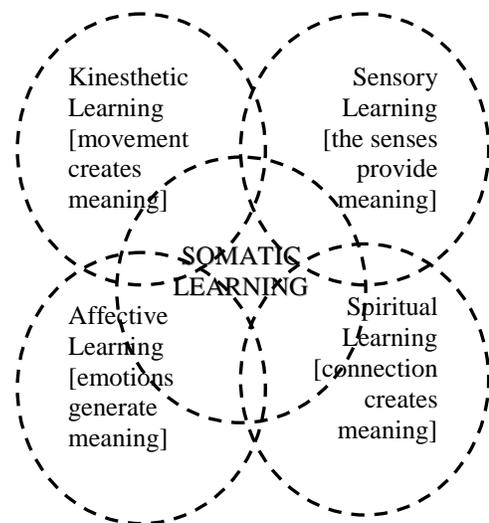


Figure 1. Somatic Learning Model

in my study made connections between their roles as managers and the somatic learning occurring through workshops that linked management concepts and yoga practice. Consider one of Samantha's first insights, which illustrate how the domains of the somatic learning model integrated for her:

Exploring yoga is teaching me to listen to my body—to breathe, to be supple, and relaxed. I sat in a two-hour meeting today that was so stressful. I concentrated on my breathing, on my posture, on opening my chest and freeing my heart—and I was able to relax, think, participate, and be a part of the process rather than being a close-minded, negative, non-verbal drone.

Samantha's words reflect a connection between the kinesthetic (breathing, suppleness, posture), affective (open heart) and spiritual (open mind) domains, which illustrates the connectedness of the somatic learning model. Likewise, Olivia describes her conflicted feelings during balance poses drawing on the aspects of sensory, kinesthetic, and affective learning:

Just the idea of doing balance poses caused an immediate degree of anxiety; the mind went into 'preparation' mode. These poses remind me of what often happens in everyday life when there is a crisis or some big important event... Hence to strike the balance poses I have to consciously think about relaxing before I attempt the movements. Balance poses are great for developing concentration; an important communication skill as far as attentive listening is concerned.

Olivia recognized the sensory (listening), affective (anxiety) and kinesthetic (relaxing muscles, breathing) aspects of both practicing balance poses and coping with life events or crises. As these examples illustrate, many aspects of the somatic learning model are often experienced at once, however on occasion just one aspect of the model may facilitate a somatic learning experience that draws in another aspect of the model. For example, Rose struggled somewhat with difficult hip-opening poses and considered the connection to her at work. "I am not flexible, but it may also be pent up emotions? Sometimes I feel like I'm so busy (especially at work) that I don't have time to experience emotions." Through movement, Rose experienced frustration physically yet made a connection with her professional role and lack of emotional expression.

As managers, these women found particularly meaningful connections between the body and their professional role as a result of making the body an overt part of the learning experience. Consider the following reflection by Desi:

This may sound strange, but I've never really taken my role as a manager very seriously. Don't get me wrong, I take my job seriously, all except the part about being a manager. The more I think about it, the more I realize that this approach was my defense against my perception of a man's opinion of women managers. What I label as my "hands off" approach was my way of avoiding being labeled as "emotional" or a "bitch." Truth is, I am emotional. Before this session, I viewed being emotional as negative. I never considered trying to connect my mind and my body. Now I am aware of my body, and I'm working on understanding its signs. As the mind and body become one, I can use my emotions as a strength. I can use the techniques that I've learned in yoga to focus and calm my spirit/mind when needed. This will surely make me a better person and manager.

The power behind these observations by the participants reflects that using yoga as a tool to bridge the connection between the body and management has been successful. As the workshop

sessions progressed, the women continue to take the yogic concepts and apply them to their managerial lives. Rebecca commented:

It's amazing how when doing tonight's yoga, my muscles shook just as they do when I am in an uncomfortable situation at work. It helps me see that those situations will make me a stronger person all around. I need to realize that my body gives me verbal cues on what will eventually make me a stronger, healthier female in all aspects.

These examples illustrate that somatic learning offers an opportunity to break out of the thinking that the mind offers the only way to engage in knowledge acquisition. The four dimensions of somatic learning depicted in the model offer a variety of dimensions for incorporating the body into adult learning contexts. Kinesthetic learning offers the opportunity for students to move by engaging in role plays or dramatizations of situations or cases. Participating in building or creating activities that require use of fine and/or gross motor skills also provide kinesthetic experience. Sensory learning can be incorporated using music or artwork that is interpreted visually and aurally in relation to the subject matter being taught. Storytelling has also been proven useful to capitalize on the sensory experiences of our pasts. We can bring emotions and feelings to the forefront of our classrooms by illustrating the power and significance of emotional awareness. From a spiritual perspective, students have opportunities for expression through movement, art, music, or symbol to construct meaning, connectedness, and awareness. Each of these options centralizes the body so that it is integral to the learning experience.

How to Foster Somatic Knowing

A variety of movement practices can be used to foster somatic pedagogy such as yoga, qigong, tai chi or even walking or running. The key to fostering somatic learning is to *overtly* include the body as part of learning. The body should be actively invited into the learning space, and creative ways to incorporate the body should be explored. Fostering somatic pedagogy within a learning environment requires consideration of a few key aspects that intentionally integrate the body into knowledge sharing. These elements include the importance of three

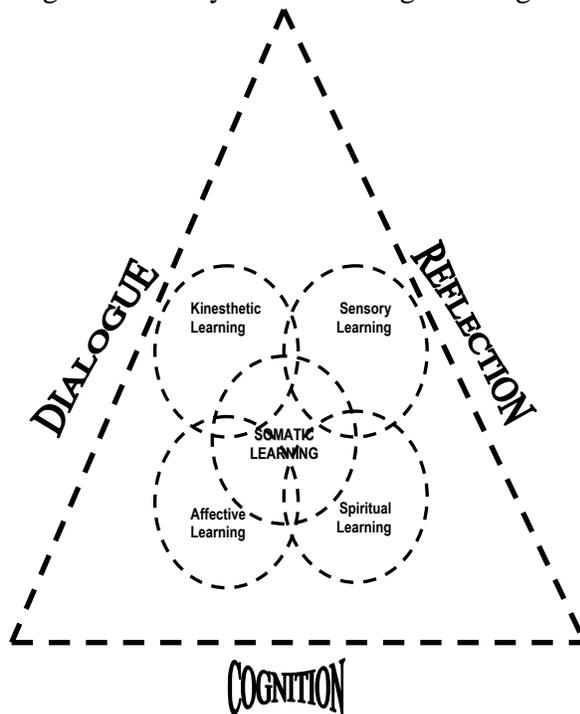


Figure 2. Revised Somatic Learning Model

embodied elements: dialogue, reflection, and cognition, which are included in a revised somatic learning model (Figure 2). The body is central to the interaction with others through dialogue via eye contact, positioning, gestures, head movements, facial expressions, and voice tone and volume. Without the body's continuous engagement, dialogue loses its significance and certainly lacks meaning necessary for learning. In essence, they complement each other. Also, recognizing the body as a form of communication allows for greater understanding through dialogue. In my own research, I discovered storytelling and experience sharing to be an integral part of the somatic learning experience. For these women, embodied dialogue resulted from a focus on the body in tandem with dialogue. Many of the women in my study commented on the unexpected comfort of realizing they shared a

great deal with one another from personal and managerial perspectives. Journal entries echoed sentiments such as “it was enlightening to hear everybody’s story” and that “the same type of things, battles with men and other struggles are different in different environments, but the troubles are basically the same.” Maria describes her reactions to the group discussions: “During the small group discussions, I felt a connection with the other members. Hearing their stories made me feel that I wasn’t so strange after all.” Melanie expanded upon the comments of Maria noting how she felt a closer bond with the group as a result of the discussions: “It was very interesting to hear the group’s comments. [I feel] very united with the group. For some reason I feel closer.” These remarks summarize how powerful dialogue was to the process of embodying management. The discursive element that revealed itself as so valuable to the participants at first seemed contradictory to a study focusing on somatic learning, but as one participant explained “that’s why I think this [study] was really good...because we had discussions. It wasn’t just a yoga class. We also talked, so it allowed me to make more connections about how I can start bringing yoga in.”

A second key element of fostering somatic learning is to include reflection as part of the learning experience. Journaling is a particularly effective reflective method because learners can privately share their thoughts, and the instructor can likewise individually respond to key in on particular responses or questions. Additionally, Somatic learning offers an opportunity for the type of reflection in action described by Schön (1983) so that learners engage in both individual and group reflection through dialogue, reflection as the result of or while engaging in movement, and journaling. Individual journals can be used both within and away from the learning environment, but are most effective when those engaged in somatic learning can record their reflections on experience in the moment. Instructors or trainers should consider the types of questions used to prompt learner reflection. Probing beyond “what” or “how” questions to continuously encourage learners to ask “why” they responded in certain way will encourage them toward critical reflection. The women managers responded to prompted questions during the 10-week workshop series. Olivia described her experience journaling: “on one side it was like pure torture, but on the other side, I was surprised at what I could produce if I really put my mind to it.” Journaling produced surprising benefits for Jasa as well. “The one night that I had a death in my family, and when I came to [the workshop], I wasn’t focusing on what I was doing.” That evening, Jasa said that writing in her journal revealed “things I never thought I would realize.” The combination of movement, discussion, and individual reflection proved to be a useful approach to the integration of the body with management for these women managers.

The previous model of somatic learning merely implied that cognitive learning existed as part of somatic learning, but did not graphically include mention of this domain. An outcome of the women manager’s experience in the study indicates that to truly eliminate the tendency to classify learning as either mind or body-oriented, not only should rational, cognitive models of learning make space for ways of learning somatically, but the initial somatic learning model (Figure 1) needed to include cognitive learning as an element of learning through the body. In order to consider their bodies as part of the learning process, the participants were asked to notice their emotions or to acknowledge where in their bodies they were feeling something in both yoga and management practice. The linkage of cognition (thought) to somatic awareness occurs in tandem, not in separation. The recognition of the unity between learning domains offers the implication to rational models of learning that despite the tendency to teach to the mind, the body is always an ever-present part of the teaching and learning process. Cognition includes the mental process of knowing, including aspects such as awareness, perception,

reasoning, and judgment. Without cognition the process of learning somatically lacks wholeness. For practitioners seeking to implement a more somatically-oriented pedagogy, including the cognitive aspects of learning is not in contradiction to learning through the body. Instead, as the revised model indicates, a somatic epistemology is inclusive of multiple modes of learning.

Practitioners may want to gauge the body awareness of the learners by assessing the learners' at the beginning of the learning experience to provide a baseline understanding about each individual's body consciousness. Most people recognize how their body impacts their mental perceptions and physical pursuits, but few consider the body's role in learning. While some people may have very strong body awareness in many different contexts, as part of fostering somatic pedagogy and for a deeper level of understanding to occur, the body needs to be overtly integrated with the particular subject being discussed or taught. While individuals vary in their levels of body consciousness as well as in their openness to view learning through an embodied lens, assessment can occur through interviews, questionnaires or guided reflection.

Conclusion

Somatic learning occurs from a conscious intention to invite the body into the learning space, to tune into the ways in which the body sends and receives information, and consideration to the diverse ways the body learns. Practice keeping the learner central to the process; the body is already there waiting to be included. Fostering somatic pedagogy requires challenging learners to open their hearts and minds to what is already in front of them; the untapped knowledge of their bodies. Learning somatically requires intention; a purposeful attention to how the body makes sense of, manifests, and creates knowledge.

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