



The challenge of working with the embodied mind in the context of a university-based Dance Movement Therapy training



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ABSTRACT

Developing the necessary skills for a dance movement therapist, such as working with emotional conscience, accessing the knowledge of the body and enhancing the intelligence of feeling, are only some of the objectives of a Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) training. Experiential groups included in psychotherapy training seek to provide opportunities for reflection on interactions and other important learning for future therapists. In this article the experience of conducting such experiential groups at the Autonomous University of Barcelona is shared through vignettes, portraying some of the emotional aspects that are being activated in both, movement and verbal groups.

Special attention is given to the challenge of working with the lived, embodied, experience and the embodied mind in an academic context which commonly emphasizes purely intellectual concepts and evaluation criteria that may at times over-determine free expression of feelings. The multidisciplinary approach adopted by the training is taken into consideration (the Marian Chace approach as well as Authentic Movement elements within the DMT field, along with Group Analytic Psychotherapy and a general intersubjective psychological orientation), as is the multicultural nature of the groups, composed of students coming from nearly twenty different countries.

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Introducing the concept of intercorporeal knowing for the learning processes of a Dance Movement Therapy training

The following article deals with the challenge of working with embodied, emotional awareness in an academic context. As lecturers on the university based master's and postgraduate programmes of Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), we would like to share our experience of working in a context which commonly emphasizes purely intellectual concepts and evaluation criteria that may at times over-determine free expression of feelings. DMT is multidisciplinary in approach and it has been our goal to integrate minds and bodies, somas and psyches, the verbal and the physical in this training process, without overvaluing one aspect over another.

Our master's and postgraduate diploma programme in DMT is hosted by the Department of Clinical Psychology and the "Aula de la Dansa" of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB).¹ Whereas the postgraduate diploma course represents a larger introductory course in DMT with about 30 European Credits (ECTS), the full training as a dance movement therapist requires the entire master's programme with 100 ECTS, a training involving between three and

four years of time. In some courses, such as group supervision or the large group, students from different years may share classes, and this mixture of students, from different levels of training and year groups, shapes, generates and enhances the group dynamics within the entire body of students.²

The DMT training group and the large group are courses that take place during the entire first two years of the training: The large group is an experiential verbal group which meets every weekend of the training during one hour. It includes all students from the first and second year of the training and as such offers the only space on the course where all students have a chance to meet and share verbally, and experience the group as one whole body (the group-as-a-whole). The DMT training group consists of smaller movement

² From 2003 to 2012 more than 280 students have passed through the training: 31% of the students are psychologists, 16% are trained dancers and the rest come from a wide range of backgrounds, such as medicine, sociology, education, only to name a few. The vast majority of our students are women, aged between 25 and 35. Only a few of our students are older than 40, and there is just a very small percentage of male participants, a common feature in many DMT training programmes (Payne, 2010). Most of our students live and work in Catalonia, but the number of students who travel from other parts of Spain to join the course, is usually quite high. A total of 34% of the students come from outside of Spain, Mexico and Chile being the countries that attract the largest number of students, but also other European countries such as Portugal, France, Germany, Italy etc. This variety of nationalities and cultures influences greatly the functioning of the groups.

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¹ The UAB is one of the five most important universities in Spain, according to the latest QS world university ranking classification system (Gutiérrez, 2010).

groups, including generally from 7 to 16 students and one or two facilitators that meet twice every weekend for 1.5 h. The objective of the DMT training group is to offer the students the possibility to take part in a DMT group and become familiar with the setting and development of a movement group. From a first person stance they can experience a broad range of possible interventions in DMT: through the creative process in movement they can explore the symbolic dimension (Best, 2000; Chorodow, 1984; Meekums, 2000; Schmais, 1985; Stanton-Jones, 1992; Vulcan, 2009) and investigate their transferential reactions towards the facilitators, other group members, the master's in general or the university as an institution, as well as the group's present fantasies.

The students thus learn to become conscious of the interconnections between bodies, psyches and individual actions. They start to engage with the concept of the collective body (Adler, 1994), as well as intercorporeal experience, a concept introduced by Merleau-Ponty (1968) which is similar to Trevarthen's (1977) notion of intersubjectivity. Merleau-Ponty's work, however, emphasised the embodied experience, thus broadening Trevarthen's notion when referring to a "shared corporeity" or "intercorporeity" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 141–143). This intercorporeity can be defined as "the capacity to understand another person's action through the body prior to, and as a condition for, cognition (Atkins, 2008, p. 48).

Fuchs (2004, 2012), too, stresses the notion of intercorporeal knowing and links it closely to Stern's and the Process of Change Study Group's concept of implicit relational knowing (Lyons-Ruth et al., 1998), a theory of prototypical experiences with significant others, a bodily knowing of how to deal with others.

This early intercorporeality has far-reaching effects: Early interactions turn into implicit relational styles that form the personality. As a result of learning processes which are in principle comparable to the acquiring of motor skills, people later shape and enact their relationships according to the patterns they have extracted from their primary experiences (Fuchs, 2004, p. 4).

This implicit corporeal knowing refers to knowing how to treat others from a very early stage onwards and was defined by Fuchs (2004, 2012) as one of six types of body memory.³

Our article builds on the above mentioned concepts which underline the importance of intersubjective, intercorporeal processes and acknowledge an implicit, bodily knowing. It values and enhances the shared corporeity and embodied learning and works with the knowledge and wisdom of the body, attempting thus to involve not only the students' thinking faculties as would be expected from an academic institution, but also their emotional and physical capacities. Subsequently experiences from two different courses⁴ in the training will be shared, courses that are so called experiential groups – spaces where experiential and integrated learning takes place through the lived experience in movement and words.

³ Fuchs (2004, 2012) defines six forms of body memory: procedural memory, situational memory, intercorporeal memory, incorporative memory, pain memory and traumatic memory.

⁴ Our courses are taught by a total amount of 30 intervening staff, including guest lecturers from all over Europe and South America, but also professional members of the Spanish Professional DMT Association as well as lecturers from the Department of Psychology of the UAB. A core team of 6–10 members, mostly teaching staff who are directly involved with experiential classes, tutorials or supervision of students, participates in regular staff meetings and exchanges the most vital information about students. A smaller team, consisting of teaching staff concerned with experiential classes, intervenes on a monthly basis the group processes. All three authors of this article belong to this smaller team of staff.

Experiential learning – working with the intelligence of feelings

At times, experiential groups may at times be quite similar to therapy. However, its main goals evolve around the students' understanding of the clinical setting and supply with opportunities to learn more about different possibilities of therapeutic intervention. Through the experiential groups the students learn to develop their capacity of observing their own sensorial, emotional and mental experience and to improve their abilities of interpersonal communication through symbolic movements and words

For Payne (2010, p. 208) it is crucial to give DMT trainees the experience of symbolizing their own feelings as part of a training programme, experiential methods such as the personal development group can provide the opportunities for these imperative experiences.

At times the experiential groups, specifically the large group, function as a barometer – the group as a pressure gauge for measuring the current 'emotional' climate on the training. That the atmosphere or the mood of the large group provides those running a therapy training with a useful reading is beyond question. Current issues usually concerned with change, teacher absence, tensions within or particular characteristics of the staff group or matters with a broader institutional implication, usually find some form of expression within the large group.

Indeed, if we apply systems theory ideas, The isomorphic principle requires that operational definitions of the structure and function of any one system in a hierarchy can be applied to other systems in the same hierarchy. When system structures and functions are described comparably at different system levels, then what is learned about the dynamics of any one system can contribute to understanding the dynamics of all other systems in the same hierarchy (Agazarian, 1987, p. 3).

One of the features of the particular academic context in which the training takes place is the split occurring between a small group of practitioner teachers, largely dance movement therapists, who constitute the 'core team,' referred to earlier,⁵ and the larger group of university academics who deliver a good proportion of the didactic curriculum but play little or no role in the organisation and administration of the training. This is mirrored in the large group by the struggle to let go of the role of teacher. Many students start off in the group with pen and paper in hand awaiting instruction. When none is forthcoming, students sometimes begin to assume teacher or leader role characteristics and propose activities such as: giving introductions, taking turns, movement activities... Nonetheless, the presence of a member of staff who, because this is a university, students assume to be evaluating their participation serves only to intensify feelings of confusion and doubt. With the communication through movement channel apparently closed the verbal channel feels fraught with uncertainty, fear and doubt. "What can I say here?", "Who is listening?" and "What can or should we talk about?" are typical expressions of the frustration felt at the beginning in relation to the absence of any clear definition, structure and task. Experiential learning and academic learning collide at this point, a matter exacerbated by the facilitator not providing direct answers to direct questions.

A further dynamic, emanating from the academic/experiential divide, concerns the relationship between speaking and silence. In the academic context communication through words is

⁵ Fuchs (2004, 2012) defines six forms of body memory: procedural memory, situational memory, intercorporeal memory, incorporative memory, pain memory and traumatic memory.

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