

Finding Our Own Language

Scientists meet Feldenkrais teachers. Thinking about a Necessary Dialogue
by Werner Schacker

In December 2002 leading scientists and Feldenkrais teachers met in Paris for a dialogue.ⁱ In an atmosphere that was both pleasantly relaxed and stimulating, a group of Feldenkrais teachers from all over the world listened to lectures with great interest. These four days were a beginning but not as yet a proper dialogue. The lectures and conversations with colleagues prompted me to write down a few thoughts about the relationship between Feldenkrais and science. This is a personal response, founded on my individual and professional background as much as on what I experienced in Paris – and what I felt to be missing there. Others would respond differently; and thus a dialogue might ensue which could take us further. My thoughts are associative and fragmentary rather than systematic. They are intended to encourage discussion rather than trying to prove or justify something.

Science and Feldenkrais

During their training Feldenkrais teachers acquire “knowledge” which they rely on in their practice and continuously develop further as they engage in a mutual learning process with clients. It is obvious that this knowledge differs from what “science” traditionally considers to be such.ⁱⁱ That makes a dialogue both difficult and interesting

The Feldenkrais Method is first and foremost an experimental practice guided by certain fundamental assumptions both explicit and implicit. These assumptions have been influenced by a variety of experiences/concepts/theories.....ⁱⁱⁱ Up to the present such practice proceeds largely unsystematically with personal preferences and chance happenings playing a major part. As Petzold critically remarked, “There exists relative stagnation with regard to research, development of theoretical models, and clinical tests.” (Petzold 2001, p.233) At the same time a degree of pressure towards achieving scientific legitimacy is to be felt - coupled with the hope that this may lead to greater social recognition; and there is also the wish (at least as far as I am concerned) that the Feldenkrais Method might be underpinned by a theoretically plausible concept which is both up-to-date and capable of consolidating and enriching our practice. I am not talking here about efficiency assessments which are surely of value and even necessary if the Feldenkrais Method is to become an integral part of the health system. However, such studies do not contribute much to the development of a scientifically founded concept capable of stimulating dialogue. After all, demonstrating our work’s effectiveness does not necessarily mean that we have understood the mechanism involved. In “The Case of Nora – Body Awareness as Healing Therapy (originally subtitled: *Adventures in the Jungle of the Brain*)” Feldenkrais wrote that the working hypothesis for this case study “is somewhere between intuition and future scientific gospel.” (Feldenkrais 1977) As yet we are still far from achieving this future science, but the conditions for its emergence have improved. Such science can only be developed through dialogue. I am interested here in a number of possibilities and preconditions for such dialogue with different sciences. What Feldenkrais teachers and scientists can learn from one another is another important issue. First I will focus on Feldenkrais practice and then sketch out how this practice could give rise to a language of its own.

Different Forms of Practice, Experience, and Knowledge

The Feldenkrais Method is a practice, a practical skill (art)^{iv}, using movement to set in motion a fundamental learning process. Time and again it is emphasized that this involves greater self awareness and more mature behaviour^v, alongside improved mobility (in terms of physiotherapy).

It goes without saying that this practice is informed by scientific insights/findings/knowledge. However, any decision whether to do this or that in taking the next step does not depend on external laws, outer knowledge, and particular techniques; instead it emerges out of the living experience through contact between practitioner and client. This is an experimental situation. However, here it is not a question of coming up with data which can be objectified, as is the case in a scientific

experiment. What is really at issue is the next appropriate step in a process of continuous learning and growth. The knowledge evolving in this context derives to a considerable extent from (both participants') precision of perception and level of awareness.^{vi} It is intimately related to the existential processes which give rise to this knowledge. Whatever we take over from other sciences would need to be capable of both integration into this knowledge and anchoring within these very processes.

In terms of directly experienced life - of a phenomenology of sensing and experiencing - all conceptual orders are secondary systems of differentiation.^{vii} In attempting to create order by way of concepts, we organize and systematize the experiences we live from moment to moment. Whatever is transposed from an experiential to a conceptual framework is in principle poorer than lived experience. The conceptual systems within the natural sciences are rather far removed from the experiences accessible to us. For instance, there is an unbridgeable gulf^{viii} between the experience of fear and its expression in words and scientific description of what is happening in the amygdala gland involved.^{ix} The conceptual structures of the natural sciences are thus not so easily incorporated in the practice of a Feldenkrais teacher.

Every word, every sentence, every description we come up with for representing and embodying an experience makes this experience both poorer and at the same time clearer. That is why concepts/conceptions and language need to be continuously reconnected with what is being lived and experienced.....- with actual processes in order to keep evolving further. That would entail developing a specific language which originates in our practice, is systematic, methodical, exact, and empirical,....., and yet differs from the language used in a "third-person" science. I am convinced that among Feldenkrais practitioners there exists a rich store of experiences, knowledge, and perceptual skills still waiting to be discovered and discussed. This will also be of interest for scientists.

Digression: Body/Embodied Life/Soma

During the past two hundred years the natural sciences have owed their success to isolating and taking apart everything that became an object of observation and study in order to examine and measure this precisely and in great detail. The whole is then supposed to be reconstituted by putting its separate parts together again. The natural sciences treat the body accordingly – as a machine whose parts can be studied in isolation and then somehow reassembled. This has been a highly successful model in human history. The living body as we experience it from inside has no place in this approach.

Systems theory, which focuses attention on coherence and interrelationships within a given whole, has subjected this successful model to fundamental criticism. The systems approach has thus become a second successful model and today's science would be inconceivable without it. Since this new model offers opportunities for studying things that were previously completely ignored, it exerts great fascination - even among Feldenkrais teachers. However, I believe that we need a third model^x since the first two models, each in their particular way, have no place for our living and lived body.....as sensed from within.

Each of these models contributes something to our understanding. It is not therefore a question of choosing between them, but rather of bringing all three jointly into play. The beginnings of such a third model and possible connections with the other models already exist.^{xi} With that in mind I would like to propose a few ideas with regard to the living and experienced body in order to foster understanding why the Feldenkrais Method requires a broader concept of the human body^{xii} than is customary in the natural sciences.

The living experienced body is a transitional form. In this body the history of evolution, of our species, and the particular history of the culture in which we exist are interwoven with our own individually lived history in a very special way which is as yet hardly understood. The body is memory. It preserves recollections of this history. Memory exists at all levels of evolution without being tied to a particular consciousness. Our lived body has greater depth than our consciousness. It is embodied history reaching into the very fibres of its physiology. That is not found in the body as object.

Living “systems” are continuously moving patterns of connections which exist and develop only within relationships. Any observable behaviour and any observable structure embodies the history of relationships lived and experienced up to that point in time.^{xiii} That also applies to the nervous system, the brain, and all other organs. Hüther, for instance, calls the brain a social organ. (Hüther 2001, p. 18)^{xiv} When we work with such a “system”, i.e. the living and lived body, the answer to what we do/say..... will originate in this history; and such a response will either further or impede a particular process. Every step is a continuation of a certain history.

This therefore calls for perceiving the living and lived body as an ever-changing pattern of relationships and also taking it seriously as such on a theoretical and conceptual level.

Of course, new potentialities of life, new patterns in life and movement, always have a corresponding neuro-physiological foundation, but this does not explain/justify/cause..... these fresh possibilities..

In his conceptual reflections Moshe Feldenkrais took an important step away from the model of the human body as a machine. “He put the human brain in the organism” (Wildman, p.9). Feldenkrais already tended to talk about human beings as if they were (nervous) systems.^{xv} In his theory, therefore, Feldenkrais remained subject to the dualism of his time, even though he overcame this in his practice.

Finding our own language

If we wish to enter into dialogue with others, we must be able to say what is important to us in our work, what experiences we have, and what insights we gain. This requires that we develop and practise using a language of our own. That can only be achieved through dialogue. We are not alone in this, nor at the very beginning of such a process. Other methods/approaches/sciences.....are or were faced with similar problems. For instance, Petzold’s Integrated Movement Therapy and Moegling’s Holistic Movement Science^{xvi} represent attempts at developing a distinct language through dialogue with different disciplines. Moshe Feldenkrais also developed his method through dialogue with various partners. Today we need to go a step further and try to overcome the gulf which continues to exist between the knowledge embedded in our practice and how we talk about and express this knowledge.

How can we find a language which is capable of expressing the full subtlety of our experiences? A vital first step surely entails writing case studies, presenting written documentation of our work.^{xvii} The practice of video recordings, which has spread in inflationary manner, has completely superseded verbal documentation of the work or prevented its emergence. Just imagine what would have happened if Moshe Feldenkrais had written many more case studies like “Nora” instead of entrusting documentation of his work to videos.

Talking and writing are decisive in any serious examination of subjective experience. However, it is necessary to learn first of all how to remain as faithful as possible to lived experience and particularly not to lose patience, constantly guarding against precipitate formulations. This will make it possible to develop sensitivity to the subtle nuances between actual experience and verbalization. A language could thus evolve which originates in experience and always returns to it, instead of merely commenting on such experience. Also that always entails a further step towards greater awareness.

However, language is not merely able to express what we already know. We can also use it to gain access to all that is implicit in our practice, all that may be sensed only vaguely but cannot as yet be expressed in words or even said at all. In this way new “data” and concepts may arise which can then be brought into contact with familiar ideas. In the realm of psychotherapy philosopher and psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin has developed a very interesting method which he calls Focusing. This is based on an everyday observation which every human being makes again and again – often without becoming conscious of what is involved. At present I am, for instance, writing a sentence and suddenly I get stuck. I have a vague feeling that somehow the sentence isn’t quite right yet. I am trying out various words which I also reject. They still don’t quite express what I wish to say. This indistinct feeling - Gendlin speaks of a “felt sense” – is obviously more precise than what I can write down at present, and contains more than what I have been able to put into words until now. So how do I know that I have found the appropriate sentence? I sense it in my body! Focusing is the methodically guided process of turning towards this “felt sense”, taking further what it implicitly contains.^{xviii} What has

been said about the interplay of bodily sensations and language can of course also be applied to movement. There therefore exists an implicit feeling for good movement, for the inherent rightness of a particular movement in relation to a specific situation.

Gendlin also applies this model originating in psychotherapy to the development of theoretical concepts.^{xix}

Dialogue

Dialogue flourishes on differences, mutual recognition, and respect. It presupposes readiness on both sides to learn, call oneself in question, and let go of cherished habits. Are we ready for that? If we take the essence of our work seriously, we will be able to contribute something important to this dialogue. In order to do that we must, as already mentioned, be able to find adequate words for what we have to say.

In recent years different disciplines have rediscovered the body, movement, and subjective experience. However, such discoveries often happen in a purely academic setting, i.e. without corresponding bodily experience. Feldenkrais teachers could become self-assured dialogue partners here, contributing an abundance of relevant experience from the field of awareness and movement.

Dialogue is many-voiced

Reality is many-voiced. Every method, every concept, every theory contributes something different and specific. The many-voiced chorus which thus arises expresses much more than an individual voice. For us there are many possible dialogue partners. We should not only favour the natural sciences. Our practice is to some extent already interdisciplinary and many-voiced because we are always dealing with living human beings who cannot be fitted into the limitations and fragmentations of separate disciplines. That is our strength. Our credibility in this dialogue as Feldenkrais teachers will also depend to some extent on our capacity both to express how we experience ourselves and the world and also to live what we proclaim by being always ready to learn from our experience.

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Notes

ⁱ Learning, Brain, and Movement: A dialogue between leading scientists and Feldenkrais teachers. 12-15 December 2002, Paris. Participating scientists: Prof. Esther Thelen, Prof. Beatrix Vereijken, Prof. Blandine Bril, Prof. Klaus Schneider, Prof. Alain Berthoz.

ⁱⁱ I am putting science in inverted commas here because I cannot go into the differences between the various sciences in this article. Science as such does not exist. Instead even within the “exact” sciences there is competition between concepts and theories which often involve different interpretations and evaluations despite being based on the same data. This applies particularly to new disciplines such as cognitive science and brain research. Anybody who is looking to the sciences for orientation and certainty will be quickly disappointed. That is another reason why we need to search for something of our own which is really appropriate for the Feldenkrais Method.

ⁱⁱⁱ Following Gendlin’s teaching, I frequently use a series of words instead of a single one in order to avoid limitation by a particular formulation, and also to emphasise open-endedness, probing, and incompleteness. The five dots.....indicate that there is space for other possible terms – including the reader’s own words, ideas, and associations. In this way something new can emerge. (For the most important articles by Eugene Gendlin see: www.focusing.org.)

^{iv} Every skill (“art”) creates its own predominantly practical canon of knowledge. This needs to be experienced for oneself and is therefore acquired in direct practice. Such knowledge cannot be learned from books. Take the art of cooking as an example. It is possible to be an excellent cook without knowing anything about food chemistry and chemical reactions as taught by the exact natural sciences. Otherwise food chemists would be the better cooks. The art of cooking is older than food chemistry and undoubtedly capable of making much more elaborately differentiated and subtle distinctions. Quality essentially depends, as in every practical skill (art), on the perceptual capacity to differentiate, on refinement, cultivation, and education of the senses. Of course a good cook will be interested in learning something about chemical processes as well and will integrate this knowledge into his work.

^v See Moshe Feldenkrais (1981,1985)

^{vi} That is precisely what Feldenkrais trainings are about. The process of professional socialization differs very much from that of scientists. Of course highly differentiated forms of perception can also be found among scientists from whose power of discernment Feldenkrais teachers can learn something too.

^{vii} See Kersting, H.J.: “You only see what you see.” (Humberto Maturana) In: Second Degree Observations about the “feldenkrais zeit”. (Issue No. 4)

^{viii} This problem concerns both ourselves and other disciplines such as consciousness research. For instance: How can first person data be combined with third person data?

^{ix} The amygdala gland belongs to the limbic system and plays an important part in the development of emotions. See, for instance, Hüther (1997), LeDoux (1998)

^x See Gendlin

^{xi} See, for instance, Gendlin’s and Varela’s works, to some extent on the Internet.

^{xii} The same applies of course to other concepts that are of importance in Feldenkrais work, such as movement. How do we have to understand movement if Awareness Through Movement is to make demonstrable sense? Defining movement as locomotion is not enough.

^{xiii} If you know Maturana’s work you will probably notice that these formulations are re-translations of his reflections on autopoietic systems.

^{xiv} “I am still fascinated by all that can be taken apart, measured, and studied in such a brain. However, I no longer believe that this approach will ever allow us to understand how a brain – and especially the human brain – functions. On the contrary: This kind of research into the working of the brain is a temptation to attribute special significance to anything that happens to be particularly easy to take apart, measure, and study. “ (Hüther 2001, p.9)

^{xv} Interestingly it was Esther Thelen, a renowned scientist, who had to remind Feldenkrais teachers during the congress in Paris that they work with persons and not nervous systems.

^{xvi} Moegling, K. (Ed 2001 and 2002), Petzold (1988)

^{xvii} See, for instance, “Groundworks. Narratives of Embodiment”, a project by Don Hanlon Johnson et al. (Johnson 1997)

^{xviii} This is of course a very brief account. A good introduction to Gendlin’s thinking is to be found in FOCUSING – How To Gain Access To Your Body’s Knowledge (Gendlin 2003) The book also contains detailed references. With regard to the body as it is lived and experienced in relation to language he writes: (a) The body is (has, feels, lives....) an implying of further events. (b) The body has intentionality, that is to say, it has (feels, knows, is, implies....) situations. (c) The body has language implicit in it. (Situation and language are furthermore implicit in each other.) (d) Words to speak come to us in a bodily way, sometimes smoothly, sometimes after a..... If the words to speak don’t come, we are stuck, and must wait for them.” (Gendlin, 1993, p.702)

^{xix} “We don’t only need the felt sense and the concepts which are already implicit in it. We also need the systematic concepts and conceptual relationships. Many of us believe that there is an either/ or, as if one would immediately loose the experienced situation through terms/concepts. However, it is the other way round: The sharper the terms/concepts, the more they are able to continue and take the experienced situation further. But one can only know whether they do this if one retains both, terms/concepts *and* experiencing. We need new systematic terms/concepts, which retain experiencing (...).” (Gendlin, 1999, p.129)

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