

Foreword: Science, Research and our Professional field

By Cliff Smyth

I am delighted to be able to write a few words of introduction to this new International Feldenkrais Federation Journal. It is published at a very important time. There is clearly an upsurge of interest in science and research in our professional field. In December 2002 almost 200 Feldenkrais practitioners and other professionals gathered in Paris for the "Learning, Brain and Movement" meeting – "a dialogue between leading scientists and Feldenkrais teachers".¹ Coming later this year is the Symposium on Research and the Feldenkrais Method on "Movement and Development of Sense of Self"² – to be held in Seattle in August. We can all benefit from the development of the thinking and dialogue in our community about research and our developing relationship with the world of science.

What is research for? I believe that for us, as practitioners, and for most of our clients and students, we don't 'need' scientific research to 'prove' the Feldenkrais Method 'works'. We experience its effectiveness for improving our action in the world. Ours is a sophisticated practice. One of the scientists at the Paris meeting suggested that it might take 500 years to conduct research into all the aspects of the Feldenkrais Method!

There is an enormous amount to be understood about our Method – just for ourselves. Research is a particular way of asking questions – sometimes hard questions. Useful understandings can flow. Implicit in our work are many aspects of the scientific method as it is actually practiced in the lab. There are new bodies of scientific knowledge – from cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and many other fields – we can draw on to reflect on our practice. Increasing our scientific literacy can improve our ability to think about our work.

At the same time, the rest of the world is increasingly seeking to understand us and wondering how to value what we do. We live in a world that continues to privilege scientific paradigms. The nature of modern society means that institutions seek proof of the efficacy when adopting or including new approaches. They look for at least some research into outcomes to justify their decisions – especially financial ones.

How to go about researching our rich practice? In many ways we are at a similar stage of development that the natural sciences were hundreds of years ago before the development of strong theories and sophisticated tools of measurement.

One possible approach is to pursue phenomenological concepts: finding ways to create the kinds of 'thick description' of what we do that the anthropologists utilise in their fieldwork. We have made a good start with a strong tradition of writing and publishing case studies in our journals. We need to continue to improve upon our ability to reflect on what we are doing as we are doing it – this is essential for practicing professionals. This will not only inform our

¹ The "Learning, Brain and Movement" meeting in Paris, December 2002 was initiated and made possible through the united work of Sabine Pfeffer and Accord mobile, Carl Ginsburg and Roger Russell.

² "Movement and Development of Sense of Self" in Seattle, August 2004, was initiated by Esther Thelen, Roger Russell and Ulla Schläfke and is supported by the FGNA.

practice, but help us "...to find ways of articulation what we are actually doing, moving it closer to the possibility of empirical studies that would in turn illuminate our work".*

There are many challenges. One is non-specificity of the 'outcomes' of what we are doing. What should we be observing, measuring and asking questions about? What constitutes improvement? When is an improvement in one part of a complex system meaningful in the dynamics of the whole system? Should we be asking about movement, pain, creativity, quality of life? Many of us, thinking about the Feldenkrais Method, find an affinity for ideas falling under the heading of 'dynamic systems approaches'. Yet these conceptual approaches present significant difficulties in designing research – identifying suitable questions, identifying and capturing the complexity of the interactions between large numbers of variables, etc. Empirical research presents its own unique challenges: What should we be measuring? What tools are appropriate? What is a meaningful result in terms of our practice?

Despite – or because of – these constraints, embracing the question of research has much to offer us. To better understand what we think we are doing. To better understand some of the phenomena we observe in practice. Clarifying our language. And the possible social acknowledgement. For these benefits we need to engage in a dialogue within our professional field about research – and a dialogue with science and scientists about their practice. This Journal will be part of that process.

I am very pleased that this is the first of step of a continuing project of the IFF Academy to publish an ongoing IFF Research Journal.

Very special thanks go to Dr Werner Kraus, former IFF Board member and holder of the Research Portfolio, who has worked for a long time to see this Journal come to fruition. Also the IFF's new Academy Co-ordinator, Carolin Theuring, who has worked to pull this Journal together in the last months.

Cliff Smyth, IFF President, March 2004.

* Don Hanlon Johnson (Ed). Groundworks: Narratives of Embodiment, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, 1997, p. 4.