

## Promoting dexterity in technical dance training using the Feldenkrais Method

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### **ABSTRACT**

Professional dance training must equip dancers to work competently in the industry. The ability to manipulate technical dance skills is an essential requirement. Referencing Nikolai Bernstein's motor learning theory, it is proposed that Feldenkrais Method learning processes can be used in technical dance training to promote the development of dexterity.

What sort of learning is important? ...the learning that enables you to do the thing you know in another way, and one more way, and then three more ways, is the learning that is important.

Moshe Feldenkrais, 1984.

In 1973, I chose teaching as a profession and career. Thirty-four years later, I am still passionate about learning and facilitating learning. From my first introduction to the Feldenkrais Method in 1987, I have always considered it part of the learning field, as opposed to the "therapeutic" field. My sole motive for commencing Feldenkrais professional training in 1988 was the belief that the kind of learning processes I encountered in the Method could be used to develop more effective approaches to technical dance training. This brief article outlines an approach I have been using with dancers studying in higher education dance programs.

Imagine yourself watching two classical ballet dancers, Adam and Bob, both with highly developed technical skills. Observing them dance on stage, they appear to be equal in their virtuosity and performance quality. Both perform all the steps technically correctly with a similar degree of ease and gracefulness. Which dancer is better?

Now imagine seeing both dancers in rehearsal with a guest choreographer. The choreographer demonstrates a short sequence of moves as the dancers scrutinise her every motion. All her movements are based on classical ballet technique, but she has ingeniously incorporated a radically different use of "body weight" to that which is developed in classical ballet training. As you observe Adam and Bob learning the sequence, it becomes apparent that Bob easily assimilates to the new choreographic style. Adam, however, looks uncertain, confused, perhaps even a little clumsy. It is as if his skills vanish before your very eyes. What happened? Both dancers are technically proficient, but one dancer is better able to quickly adapt his skills to new conditions.

Nikolai Bernstein (1996) used the term "dexterity" to denote the ability to adapt motor skills to new conditions. Dexterity is "...a motor ability to quickly find a correct

solution for a problem in any situation ... the capacity of dexterity appears to be, not in the movements themselves, but rather in their interaction with the environment” (Bernstein, 1996:210-211). In the above example, Bob is more dexterous than Adam because he is able to readily adjust his classical ballet technique to the new movement patterns and dynamics required to accurately perform the specific choreography.

Professional dancers must constantly adapt their dance technique to meet ever-changing stylistic, choreographic and staging requirements. They need to do this well, not only for professional and artistic reasons, but also to cope efficiently with demanding physical workloads. Dancers who can effectively manipulate their dance technique are better prepared to work competently and safely in the theatrical dance profession. For this reason, it would be advantageous to teach technical dance skills in a manner that promotes the development of dexterity; for “dexterity is exercisable”, that is, it is “...a capacity that can be developed and trained...” (Bernstein, 1996:231)

The aim of technical dance training is for dancers to learn a set of stable motor skills that collectively constitute a dance style’s movement “vocabulary”. Today, dancers continue to learn technical dance skills primarily through imitation and daily repetitive practise. The years of practise needed to acquire technical proficiency attests to the difficulty of learning motor skills that require accurately reproducing specific body postures and movements (Bernstein, 1996, Reed & Bril, 1996). That many dancers can and do achieve technical mastery through “traditional” dance training practices is not in question. The focus of this article is on exploring whether current dance teaching methods can more effectively and explicitly promote the development of dexterity.

Returning again to our two dancers, Adam and Bob varied in their ability to adapt their dance technique. Assuming both developed their skills through “traditional” methods of classical ballet training, we could surmise that Bob’s dexterity is not directly attributable to his dance training, but to some other source. What if classical ballet teaching methods were to include learning processes that aim to explicitly develop dexterity? “Traditional” dance training practices may need to be re-examined with this aim in mind. A suitable arena for researching and implementing such an examination would be university-based dance programs.

Situated amidst a culture of academic study and research, higher education dance programs are well placed to lead the way in investigating and designing dance training practices that enable dancers to more efficiently and effectively manipulate their dance technique. Since many higher education dance programs include somatic education studies such as Alexander Technique, Bartenieff Fundamentals, Body-Mind-Centring, Feldenkrais Method, Ideokinesis, etc. in their curriculum, one research path would be to investigate how dexterity is promoted in somatic education practices. There is no doubt that the learning processes in one of these somatic education approaches, namely the Feldenkrais Method, explicitly develops “motor wits”, a term Bernstein uses to describe dexterity. This is especially true of the exploratory style of learning used in Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lessons.

In ATM lessons, an intentional act is repeated many times in order to perceive how it is done and explore the variety of ways it can be accomplished. Attention is directed to kinesthetically perceiving differences between one way of doing the act and another. Learners are advised how to conduct themselves in order to refine their perceptual discrimination and so pick up more sensory information by which to monitor, direct, and vary

what they are doing. Movement constraints are stated to guide and demarcate the exploration. Such constraints serve to shape the way an act may be accomplished and consequently the kinds of sensations that may be experienced and perceived. Skeletal-articular relationships and muscular synergies intrinsic to an act are explored in different body positions, and in varied situations. The very fact that learners are explicitly invited to explore different ways of doing an act indicates that an aim of ATM lessons is to promote the kind of learning that enables a person to generate alternative ways of enacting their intention. This kind of learning fosters the human capacity of free choice (Feldenkrais, 1981) and enhances the ability to discover flexible and adaptable behaviour (Buchanan & Ulrich, 2001).

The following quotes illustrate some of Bernstein's ideas on how to promote the development of dexterity. The first quote identifies several factors to consider when setting up training conditions.

“...the most sensible and correct training would be organised in a way that combined a minimisation of effort with a large variety of well-designed sensations and that combined optimal conditions for meaningfully absorbing and memorising these sensations” (Bernstein, 1996:181).

Ideas expressed in this quote closely parallel Feldenkrais's ideas on providing conditions for learning. Of particular interest is Bernstein's phrase “well designed sensations”, suggesting movement training be designed so the learner experiences the sensations necessary to do a skill. As discussed above, ATM lessons are designed to do just that.

The next quote states clearly the purpose of repetition in training and that directed attention can enhance the learning process. Most importantly, the phrase “to feel as fully as possible” emphasises that motor skill and dexterity are founded on the development of a comprehensive proprioceptively-based image of the act to be performed.

“...it is very important for one to repeat the task many times in order to feel as fully as possible all the changing external conditions and all the adaptive reactions of the movement itself to the changes in the environment ... sometimes up to 75% of this work proceeds subconsciously, but intelligent attention is able to accelerate it considerably.” (Bernstein, 1996:185)

The final quote illustrates Bernstein's unique perspective on motor skill training. The aim of training is to improve the process by which one finds ways of successfully doing an intentional act.

“...[D]uring a correctly organised exercise, a student is repeating many times, not the means for solving a given motor problem, but the process of its solution, the changing and improving of the means” (Bernstein, 1996:205).

This view implies that intentional acts can be realised in different ways. The purpose of repetition is therefore *not to perfect one particular way of doing an act but to practise finding various ways of accomplishing it*. Viewed from a Bernsteinian motor learning perspective, ATM learning processes unquestionably aim to encourage the ability to solve motor problems.

Based on Bernstein's theory and through Feldenkrais Method practice, it is proposed that a way dancers can explicitly develop adaptable, flexible, dance technique is by repeating

a technical dance skill many times while intentionally, and systematically, *varying* key movement elements associated with its correct performance. Such training could readily be modelled on ATM learning processes. ATMs could be designed, or existing ATM lessons used, to explore technical skills of different dance styles. For example, plies are a foundational technical skill in classical ballet, and are practised in every class. Movement constraints defining the correct technical execution of simple plie exercises performed at the barre<sup>1</sup> include:

- the lower limbs remain externally rotated to maximum range of motion at the hip joint
- body weight is distributed evenly over both feet
- the pelvis is “level” and its position remains constant
- leg movement is continuous for the duration of the plie
- the hip, knee, and ankle joints flex, and then extend, simultaneously while remaining aligned in the same plane of motion
- the torso remains lengthened



Classical Ballet plie in second position of the feet.

Let's return to Adam to see what kinds of ATM-based training processes could be used to explicitly develop his dexterity. Imagine Adam doing plie exercises at the barre. Instead of repeatedly practising “the correct” way of doing a plie in second position, he could intentionally find different ways of doing it. For example, he could vary the position and movements of his pelvis while attending to the effects in the rest of himself. The whole exploration could take place standing, or it could be elaborated over several sessions, using different body positions in which torso-pelvis-leg relationships are explored. Alternatively, Adam could explore distribution of his body weight between and over his feet, or the use of his torso, or the placement of his feet on the floor, or the alignment of his legs, and so on. Admittedly, the intentional variations in any of these explorations would take him outside the parameters of “correct” classical technique (a technique which continues to expand and develop). However, Adam can use the kinesthetic information obtained from actively perceiving what he is doing to either improve his classical technique, or break out of it, that is, to intentionally go outside its technical parameters when he so chooses, or when the choreography demands it.

There are body movements and coordinations Adam could explore that are not specifically proscribed in the classical ballet plie. For instance, he could intentionally vary his breathing as he plies. He could coordinate his descent and ascent with different breathing cycles. Or he could use different breathing coordinations. He could imagine breathing into different parts of himself and notice the effect of such thinking on his plie. Alternatively he could explore the way he uses his eyes, the use of his abdominal and pelvic floor muscles, and

even experiment with levels of muscle tensioning he uses in his limbs, torso, neck, and face. Again, Adam can use experiences emerging from these explorations to refine his classical technique or vary it.

All technical skills fundamental to classical ballet could be explored in this manner. Hypothetically, engaging in these kinds of training processes would enable Adam to maintain and further refine his classical ballet technique while simultaneously developing his ability to adapt his technique to meet ever-changing stylistic, choreographic and staging requirements. The same approach could be used to systematically explore dance skills of different western theatrical dance styles. In short, stable technical dance skills and dexterity can both be developed through appropriately designed dance training.

I have used the approach described above as a learning strategy in the higher education dance courses I teach. Often I describe the approach as being akin to dance improvisation. Improvising involves creatively exploring possibilities contained within a nominated theme, image or suggested structure. The analogy provides dancers with a useful point of reference and encourages them to perceive themselves as being engaged in a creative process – even when learning set technique. By improvising around and inside the movement parameters of a technical skill, dancers invoke their creativity to master technical skills and also become more competent in manipulating those skills, as well as in the improvising process. They can realise that there is room for variation even within the most tightly constrained dance skills. They also can become proficient in organising their movements to shift and flow within such constraints or, when they desire, to consciously, competently, and confidently venture outside technical constraints.

To date the efficacy of this approach has been informally evaluated solely through observation of students' performance, students' written reports, and verbal reports of the students' other dance teachers. Drawing on 15 years experience using this approach, I have identified three factors that significantly influence learning outcomes. First is the dancer's level of engagement with a learning process that is new and varies considerably from accepted "traditional" dance training methods. Second is the amount of class time allocated for dancers to engage in this form of training, which in turn reflects the extent new dance training approaches are fostered in the curriculum. Third is the degree of understanding, acceptance, and integrated use of the approach by the dance teaching faculty.

Preliminary educational research investigating how somatic education practices may be formally incorporated into contemporary dance training (Holdaway, Kovich & Simmonds, 2002) suggests somatically informed dance training practices are likely to be more effective if they form the basis of a dance program's curriculum. In so doing, students and teaching faculty would all participate in a common culture of learning and training. Training for dexterity would be encouraged, researched, and pedagogically refined in such a culture. Admittedly, this is an ideal scenario. Nevertheless, I am certain that approaches to learning practised in the Feldenkrais Method have much to offer in the field of dance training. I know of many Feldenkrais teachers, and other somatic educators, working in this area and am confident that somatically informed methods of dance training will continue to evolve and be validated, enabling new generations of dancers to safely, intelligently and creatively work in their chosen profession.

### **Footnotes**

1. Classical ballet classes are organised in two distinct sections. Technical exercises are first done at the “barre” (a fixed, horizontal wooden bar which dancers use for support), and then in the “centre” (in the centre of the dance or rehearsal studio without the aid of the barre).

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### **Author's biography**

Zoran Kovich worked as a martial arts instructor, then as a professional dancer, and now teaches the Feldenkrais Method in Sydney, Australia. Positive changes in his dance skills emerging from personal practice of Mabel Todd's ideokinetic method prompted Zoran to investigate and experience other somatic education approaches, leading him to commence Feldenkrais training in 1988. Since 1990, he has lectured in higher education dance programs, designing and presenting courses in Feldenkrais Method, Somatic Education, functional anatomy, kinesiology, and movement analysis. His academic background includes studies in social science, performing arts, and cognitive science. Zoran is deeply interested in exploring links between theory and practice, especially in the area of training and learning. In 2004, he was accredited as an assistant trainer in the Feldenkrais Method.