

ACCESS TO SOMATIC THEORY AND APPLICATIONS:  
SOCIO-POLITICAL CONCERNS  
Martha Eddy, CMA, RSMT, Ed.D.

**The Need for "Social Somatics:"** Somatic disciplines are those systems of study that view physical reality and specific bodily or even cellular awareness as a source of knowledge, usually to be gained through touch, movement, and imagery as processes of embodiment. Somatic experience focuses on self-awareness and tends to be internal and indulging in time, occurring in a "neutral" environment. This century's use of the term "somatic" (as a model of holism derived from bodily wisdom), was intended by early thinkers (e.g., Thomas Hanna, Don Hanlon Johnson, John Vasconcellos) to also be applied to external action and social change. Hanna (1984) defined somatic study as a study of the living body existing in relationship to at least five somatic assumptions. One such assumption regards "somatic ecology" in which the soma demonstrates interdependence with the environment, "social as well as physical" (p.34). This talk will focus on somatic movement disciplines, especially as applied to dance, and their role in world interchange.

Dance is a field filled with options regarding philosophical paradigms, pedagogical models, aesthetic choices, and research designs. In the business of dance, daily decisions are made that resist or contribute to the continuation of the Cartesian split. The somatic model generally resists it. A somatic model may or may not be selected by a particular dance specialist or organization. No matter what choices are made, from the perspective of societal power, dance is a predominantly marginalized field (of art; predominantly of women; of the body). Often dance leaders have chosen to ally with those models that are accepted by the mainstream in order to re-invoke some power, often hierarchical, elite, Cartesian, or reductionistic models. These currently favored models dilute the somatic experience that acting from the unified body-mind-spirit inclusive of related emotions makes a unified and powerful statement. "Social Somatics" battles the myths:

1. Holism/Somatics is a weak and undeveloped perspective./ Somatic theories provide strong and integrative concepts, and applications, that generate healthy and creative solutions to age-old problems, many of these problems as of yet left unsolved by the status quo.
2. Holism/Somatics can not be studied systematically./ Somatic practices lend themselves to a variety of research methods. Qualitative descriptive studies inclusive of phenomenological approaches and quantitative research methods

emergent from quantum physics are especially suitable. Basic surveys can also make large contributions.

3. Holism/Somatics is only for the privileged. / Somatic practice can be free of cost. For example, anyone can choose to pay attention to the breath process while walking down the street.

**Access to Somatics.** "Social Somatics" implies taking context and culture into account and being activists to strive for holistic models centered in physical experience. Having access to somatic theory and practices is a component of "Social Somatics." Some current challenges to "social somatic" inquiry and access to it include:

- Lack of consistent use of word "somatic" across different disciplines. For instance, the meaning of the term somatic differs in the following uses: somatic nerves, psychosomatic, somatic beliefs.
- Continuation of Cartesian thinking in society despite other trends and paradigmatic shifts.
- Complications of existing within a market economy.
- Lack of appreciation of holistic movement and dance practices that already exist in ancient traditions and are constantly being rediscovered spontaneously during on-going creative processes.

Even more problematic is that somatic disciplines sometimes buy into elitist models or can be experienced as oppressive. For example, teaching methods may or may not be inclusive and based in empowerment. Most obvious is that it usually costs a good deal of money to become educated in the most renowned systems: Alexander Method, Bartenieff Fundamentals, Body-Mind Centering, Feldenkrais Awareness through Movement, Laban Movement Analysis, and other Somatic Movement education and therapy programs. However, this is not philosophically driven. Somatic practices have lived outside of the mainstream of educational and health institutions. Without institutional support these programs have limited access to student loans and scholarships or other forms of governmental and corporate support. For those people interested in private lessons (by definition an expensive service, albeit a powerful form) there are few reasonably priced insurance options or inexpensive types of access to these individually tailored lessons/sessions.

**Issues Related to Access:** I have come to identify numerous themes that affect access to somatic theories and application during my work at Moving On Center - The School of Participatory Arts and Research. Dialogues often ensue about "how to get the somatic work out into the world," inclusive of our own neighborhood in

downtown Oakland, CA. I have found myself arguing the importance of "fighting for" Time, Space, Quiet, and Understandable Language. I also make a case for the importance of teaching transitions from Neutrality to Action, and the role of both Nature and Nurture, or the Body and Education in the life growth process. These are all treasures; critical to somatic awareness and social change and especially in order for more people to have access to the somatic experience. They all are expensive in our culture. The costs for these treasures must also include our creative output in engaging in a deep process, the risks involved in honest communication, and the energy consumed in forming networks.

*Time:* We need to find funding for more time since it takes time to receive information, especially when learning by practice, and then more time to absorb and integrate the new knowledge. Educators and therapists, alike need to advocate for the time needed to give classes with substantial length.

*Space:* Generally space needs to be open, clean, and accessible all of which may cost money to achieve. And at times we need variation in our environment and thus access to a space that is perhaps chaotic or at least art-filled might be called for. At times we may need access to nature to best confirm somatic knowledge.

*Language:* Somatic language needs to be learned through experiences, which takes time. Language that hasn't been "experienced" and accepted can be alienating. Language needs translation to make concepts or principles accessible in varying settings. Concepts need to be checked within distinct cultural context to determine if they are appropriate and still empowering in different venues.

*Quiet:* Quiet is less available than ever before. Noise pollution is prevalent even in rural setting due to air traffic. Sound-proofing is expensive. Whereas students of somatic work thrive in quiet, educators can also creatively choose to use sound stimuli as part of the educational structure. This process is a model of making a transition from neutrality and receptivity to responsiveness and action.

*Neutrality into Action:* Somatic processes often begin in a relaxed state. Kestenberg (Loman, 1990) postulated that 33% of life occurs in "neutral flow," a state of rest. Often sleeping for 8 hours a night accommodates this. However when the need for sleep is not met or when sleep is other than "relaxed," we need more rest, more neutral experiences. The somatic practices provide deep rest. To move toward "social somatics" however, we need to be skilled in taking action as

well. Some somatic systems also help us to shift into action. In my experience the Laban/Bartenieff system - Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and its related modalities (i.e., Action Profiling, Body-Mind Centering, Kestenberg Movement Profile, Movement Pattern Analysis, & Movement Signature Analysis) are great tools for this transition. One of the four primary themes that LMA espouses is that movement includes a fluctuation of exertion and recuperation (Bartenieff, 1980; Eddy & Whitacre, 1984). In order to accomplish much in life a person can find what movement provides recuperation for a particular type of exertion. LMA provides models of making efficient transitions from neutral flow to activity with dynamically varied types of engagement. LMA teaches this through embodied experience. Dance is also a natural inroad to dynamic action. Dance understands creative process and how to take a potent stand, step or leap! These skills need to be practiced in becoming effective activists.

*Nature/Nurture as Equal Keys in Somatic Practice:* Two basic concepts stemming from the influence of nature that come to mind are: Breath is a reality that can be relied upon while living. The body has limitless resources. A third physical phenomenon, that of development and growth, is less explicitly the domain of nature alone. Developmental theories debate whether growth is neuro-maturational or influenced by nurturing forces. Developmental observations can establish a basis of our human universality, and our common experience. However, the somatic movement systems such as Bartenieff Fundamentals, Body-Mind Centering and Feldenkrais Awareness through Movement (Eddy, 2000) begin with shared qualities of the body and almost immediately introduce movement and touch as avenues for bringing awareness to a person's idiosyncratic and habitual patterns of crawling, creeping and walking. This process implies recognizing both nature and nurture as potent forces. These views of development perceive movement practices as keys to changing patterns and introducing new neural pathways. Dynamical systems theory (based in new physics also known as quantum theory, chaos theory or complexity theory) sees the introduction of disruption as a way to destabilize a habitual pattern, and thereby induce new learning and change (Thelen, 1995). This destabilization often comes from changes in the environmental constraints that our bodies cope with when dealing with a task. A "soma interacting with the environment" learns from environmental change. Somatic movement experiences by definition introduce a change to a task and frequently invite practice in new and varied environments. Regarding other aspects of the influence of "nurture," we can consider that in humans our structure and our behavior change constantly. The nervous system is capable of great change due to

neural plasticity. Healing and learning have almost limitless capacities. Similarly we change our awareness by opening up our senses, inclusive of intero and extero reception. The ensuing perceptions from these sensations can provide entry points for inviting even our expectations to change. In western society people, inclusive of dance and/or somatic professionals, can become entrained as "user, takers, and manipulators" (Fitt, 1996) easily. Changes in perception, together with a "social somatics" perspective can support another choice, becoming active agents.

"Social Somatics" arising from within dance communities can be exemplified by this conference (Dancing in the Millenium) which involved building networks and supporting political action on Capital Hill from diverse dance and movement perspectives. Dance professionals can also assist in applying somatic theory by following the natural flow of health and communication that stems from dancing. Including direct connections with indigenous cultures and traditional practices during dance and cultural events can help to build stronger networks. However, we must be careful not to co-opt knowledge. Rather, it is wise to find experts to share their knowledge whenever possible and to be selective in choosing those experiences from traditional knowledge that encourage insights from within, leading to empowerment. Meanwhile we also need to be open to change in response to experiencing these forms. At the very least, it is important to make time to credit sources. In teaching experientially we often struggle to have enough time for embodiment, let alone "background" information or resources. I believe we must prioritize providing access to information for it is this access to either internal or external sources of information that deepens knowledge and empowers people. One exercise I devised is to have people move. Simultaneously they are asked to feel and name out loud the teachers that the body memory retraces as important sources of movement learning. Tracing a lineage or otherwise sharing resources can be equally important for participants or observers/listeners, students and audiences alike.

As educators, there are numerous points to consider in creating a "Social Somatics" curriculum or a dance or movement course with a "social somatics" point of view. Some possibilities include:

1. Consciously determine when the uses of Euro-centric models of health (e.g., language of anatomical sciences) are useful or limiting for the larger goals at hand.
2. Provide readings from the early thinkers of somatic theory and the proponents of "Social somatics" (e.g., Green, Hanna, Johnson. Kleinman).

3. Seek to develop programs that cite the underlying influences within the somatic theories. The strong influence of Eastern philosophies is most notable. For instance,

Bartenieff = Chi Gung

Cohen = Katsugen Undo of Seitai / Aikido / Zen

Feldenkrais = Judo

Laban = Eastern European Folk Dance and its potential overlap with Eastern cultures.

5. Open the avenue of research to look into the lives of Rolf, Trager, Erikson, Alexander and other somatic leaders, to discover what philosophies guided them to turn to self-reflection as well as touch and movement as primary sources of information.

5. Provide resources for a wide variety of research views and tools (Capra, 92/93; Eddy, 1999).

6. Give students opportunities to share their "lived" or embodied knowledge through and at performances, in classes and at home, with people who otherwise have less access to the language or experiences that they have valued.

7. Take a cue from qualitative educational research to observe astutely and "Hear Students' voices. Listen and develop programming that addresses real issues in students' lives.

Next, I will share some examples of programs and their problems in meeting socially responsible criteria. In the formation of our school in Oakland, Moving on Center -- School of Participatory Arts and Research we developed a mission statement that aims to integrate body-mind health and interdisciplinary arts with community activism. In the five years that we have been implementing this mission struggles have included:

- Helping students to feel secure with their somatic knowledge and confident enough to share it. Often the warmth of the somatic experience creates a womb-like relationship that then necessitates a series of "birthing processes" in order to support activism. Some steps that have helped this process have included teaching "participatory values" and then requiring that these values be applied in the final performances.
- Flowing in and out of the community of Oakland with our philosophy and knowledge. Whereas just being in Oakland, and specifically housed in the Alice Cultural Arts Center has afforded us with numerous heartfelt opportunities to exchange ideas and solve problems with people with diverse backgrounds and

styles, we also have had inevitable misunderstandings and conflicts. We view these as opportunities for conflict facilitation (Schaub, 2000).

- Dancing-making from a somatic source often gets lost in personal experience and only grows to the level of personal ritual. We are creative in developing venues for the sharing of personal rituals. Furthermore we strive to differentiate between what is appropriate for intimate audiences and what must be crafted and cultivated to have meaning, albeit derived from deep bodily knowing, across a wider range of individuals. This held particularly true for the outdoor festivals that we sponsored at Jack London Square and our performances in downtown San Francisco venues.

There are numerous other programs around the nation that are seeking to share somatic knowledge with local communities and people in need. Moving On Center invites programs to list innovative and activist somatic programming with us: ([info@movingoncenter.org](mailto:info@movingoncenter.org)). Other somatic systems, most notably those aligned with psychology or psycho-dynamic models such as dance therapy, have offered movement services for diverse populations for year. In the realm of hands-on touch work however there are fewer opportunities. Two that come to mind are the Lomi free clinic in Santa Rosa, CA, and the program of Somatic Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) where participants provide sessions for victims of torture and abuse.

Professional somatic organizations also desire inroads for providing access to their work. Each professional association (e.g., BMCA, Feldenkrais Guild, ATI) prides itself with those practitioners that have found ways to work with diverse ranges of people with special needs. They also attempt to do research or provide services to a broader constituency. The International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association (ISMETA) strives to make the field of somatic movement and education known, and to engage all somatic movement modalities in working for national and international recognition together. Furthermore it supports research and community building projects that will ideally contribute to a larger degree of access to somatic practices. In other words, through ISMETA there is an on-going effort to keep opportunities for healthy and skillful touch, movement and dancing alive.

I personally endeavored to find more avenues for somatic applications in educational settings through my dissertation research, entitled "The Role of Physical Activity in Educational Violence Prevention Programs for Youth," an

ethnographic cross-case analysis of six programs around the nation. Emergent findings included a system of evaluating violence prevention program regarding the selection of teaching methods that appropriate met curricular goals. I also discovered a set of teaching "tactics" used by excellent movement teachers. In general these tactics echoed values within somatic learning. For instance they included the use of holistic models, acceptance of complexity, a willingness to be vulnerable and express feelings, providing synthesis and opportunities for self-reflection, and being real. (Eddy, 1998). Two of these programs demonstrated the natural link between somatic experience (inclusive of emotional expression) and social activism. Destiny Arts, of Oakland, CA, integrates dance (choreography, contact improvisation, somatic exercises, modern dance and hip-hop), kung-fu and theater to build moving stories of anti-violence and youth empowerment. The Peaceable School Curriculum (Beardall, 1998), a middle school health curriculum, developed (and presented at this conference) by Certified Laban Movement Analyst, Dance Therapist and educator Nancy Beardall in Newton, MA., uses movement games and dance to discover issues and reclaim strength in light of the challenges youth face.

**Somatic awareness informs active decision-making.** As part of the Arts Advocacy training this Wednesday (July 19, 2000) advocate Ozlu's advice was to "follow the heart" in order to be effective in speaking to politicians. The Dalai Lama (1997) suggests we "listen to our solar plexus" in confronting violence. Beardall (1998) teaches youth to regard the 'body sense' in making choices about personal and school safety. As movement leaders we can model the possibility in which "clues to difficult dilemmas live inside the body" and can be accessed through reflection, movement and touch. This is a free and inalienable right of all people. A strong goal is to advocate for the right of all to have substantial time and space for embodied learning, self-reflection, and dialogue about meaningful applications of body wisdom. The next step is to actually take "somatics" and dance to the "power table," where policies are decided.

**Recommendations:** As "social somatics" activists a mandate is therefore to work for the preservation of time for self-reflection, in-depth education, and new models of health care. This is part of appropriating holism. By claiming the right to time we push back the trend toward compressing "lived" experiences. We are reminded to enjoy the present. In asserting the need for space we engage in the politics of holism seen in the view that the body is interdependent on our environment. Time and space are economic issues that will be resisted. Others



may already be jealous that studios take up large spaces (and appear empty) and that smaller size classes, and longer class periods, are a luxury. Be tenacious with your values. I believe everyone has a right to know more about how best to take care of him or herself. It can be powerful for dance-making and dance education environments to add to the cry by choosing to instill these values and to claim the significance of active, as well as neutral, time and space, inclusive of periods of quiet. Classroom teachers can choose daily to dedicate three minutes of their class-time to somatic practice. Administrators can value the skills of educators trained in kinesthetic awareness especially as it informs socio-emotional learning. Everyone can help with translating alienating language to more accessible language. Schools can choose to counter anonymity, build accountability and community interaction, as well as affirm learners as whole people (Eddy, 1998). Alliances between movement and dance organizations can support a paradigm shift as well as choose to heighten access to "social somatic" experiences (e.g., through scholarships, web-sites, free events, outreach, locating in more diverse venues).

**Summary:** Through embodied experiences of holism we can all become more comfortable with the vulnerabilities and imperfections of our bodies, the outrage and outcries of our emotions, and the insights of spirit (especially by weaving dance and movement more fully into the social fabric). We can empower ourselves to take the "expected and unexpected" in life's lessons seriously and move into action. By embracing "social somatics" we can strengthen our own perceptions, self-awareness, and efficiency and in turn have the energy to strive to build a stronger community of thinkers, movers and activists. Using somatic perception we are more equipped to open to new awareness as well as make personally-informed and impassioned decisions. As activists we need to recognize that time and space are precious and can and are co-opted all the time. It helps to construct an expectation that all people involved benefit from each other's experience of wholeness and strength. Whenever possible, it is worthy to give due recognition to traditional cultures which have a long history of holism and honor them by crediting them. In general, it helps to determine ways to embrace somatic theory with inclusion of all, and activism for all, as a clear intention.

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**Martha Eddy**, CMA, RSMT, Ed.D. is Director of the Center for Kinesthetic Education in NYC and Director of the SOMAction Movement Therapy Training affiliated with Moving On Center in Oakland CA.

