

Body-Mind Centering® as a somatic approach to dance education

By Cathie Caraker

“As we manipulate, we touch and feel; as we look, we see; as we listen, we hear... Attention is the key to active perception.” -John Dewey

“Transformation is just a membrane away.” -Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen

“Body-Mind Centering® (BMC) is an innovative approach to movement reeducation which explores the relationship between movement and mind. Based on the embodiment of anatomical, psychological and developmental movement principles, BMC is an approach to experiencing our living anatomy and a method of movement analysis which can be useful in the creative process.

In this workshop we'll use the BMC work as a lens through which we investigate our creative resources, turning our dancing inside-out to render the felt body visible and expressive. We'll explore early developmental movement states and their relationship to the inner support and movement of the breath, organs and skeleton. Researching movement from the body's fluid systems (blood, cerebrospinal, interstitial, synovial, lymph, cellular), we'll access new specificity in our movement qualities and theatrical expressions. Through intentional touch and improvisation, we'll strengthen the links between inner experience and crystallization of form.” – [BMC workshop description](#), Cathie Caraker

“Ok, let's start with an arterial rhythm, yeah, feel the weight of the blood in your peripheries connecting to the earth, follow the pulse... now add some venous flow, find the rebound, the cyclic return of the blood to the heart... now drop the arterial and add some csf to the venous, your mass is becoming more diffuse, sensing the environment, your nerves are being magnetized, suspended in time and space... and let's take out the venous... and add some lymph for more spatial tension, specificity and detail, where are your boundaries?... and drop the csf now and let's bring in some synovial, fluid of the skeletal system, find the spaces between the bones, freedom, jiggle it, throw it away... and now shift to interstitial, that juicy sponginess in your muscles and fascia, thick ocean connecting all the cells... and let's come back to simply rest and breathe in the cellular fluid, just being present as you are...”

For a stranger walking into this dance studio off of the street, it might sound like I am speaking Chinese. But for these dancers in the choreography course of the Amsterdam Theaterschool, it is a language based in physical experiences which they have now been exploring for several weeks.

In this particular class we are researching the fluids systems of the body and how we can use their specific movement qualities and perceptual states as tools in creating dances. We are doing an exercise which I call “the mad scientist”, in which we practice shifting and transforming our minds and movement from one fluid state to another, combining different fluids in our movement as a scientist might in a test tube, and sometimes discovering new and surprising modes of expression.

Afterwards we discuss what we found ourselves and saw in each other's movement. Then I ask them to work in duos, with one mover and one observer /director, using the fluids as a common experiential language for developing and transforming the movement material.

In the following days I give them various compositional assignments, including making site-specific dances, task-oriented movement and working with objects, all of which serve to highlight the specific body-mind states of each fluid system in different contexts. The dances which emerge are wildly diverse, playful, inventive and, above-all, specific in their physical expressions. Most of the movement vocabulary does not look like anything the students may have learned in a technique class. There is humor, theatricality, timing, kinesthetic awareness and spatial clarity. I am delighted. These are the moments when I am reminded of why I continue to share this work.

I first heard about the work of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen when I was still a dance student at what was then the dance department of the Theaterschool of Amsterdam, now called the School for New Dance Development (SNDD). It was 1984 or '85. I was very excited about the study and practice of Contact Improvisation and just beginning to teach the form myself. I read some articles by Bonnie which were published in Contact Quarterly magazine and something clicked. Her perspective on the developmental movement process as a crystallization or blueprint of evolutionary and human movement potential seemed to echo my experience of learning CI and to possibly offer a paradigm for teaching.

Upon finishing my dance training I moved to Amherst, Massachusetts where I commenced my studies at the School for Body-Mind Centering. This was the beginning of what would become not only more than 6 years of study and practice to become a teacher/ practitioner of BMC, but countless hours of movement research in the dance studio, experimentation with methods of teaching and many improvised performances.... all to the ends of embodying the BMC learning through dance and developing methods of sharing this learning with other dancers.

I was asked to write here about the influence of BMC on dance education. Dance education is a broad subject, which encompasses many different styles, techniques and pedagogues. My experience falls only within the field of 'new dance', as the post-post-modern dance movement is now commonly called in Europe. New dance is in itself a rather vague, catch-all term, but my impression is that one of the defining aspects of the movement has been the influence of the so-called "somatic" approaches on dance learning and creating.

Somatics: creating a new paradigm for movement training

Somatic approaches to movement reeducation include disciplines such as Alexander technique, Feldenkrais, Bartineff Fundamentals, Body-Mind Centering, Ideokinesis, Klein Technique, Skinner Releasing Technique and many others. While the use of the term 'somatics' is new, methods of reeducating human movement patterns through the use of anatomical and other kinds of imagery, touch and proprioception have been around for a long time.

F.M. Alexander and Mabel Ellsworth Todd (author of "The Thinking Body" and one of the pioneers of Release Technique) were already developing their ideas early in the last century. In the 1970's the various Release Techniques, in particular, began to catch on in alternative pockets of the dance world, in conjunction with the growth of the American post-modern dance movement.

Most somatic disciplines are not dance practices, in and of themselves. Some actually involve very minimal movement, the implication being that small and /or simple movements give us more opportunity to observe our sensations and respond to them with awareness, thus facilitating the development of more efficient movement patterns. However, principles and methods found in somatic disciplines can certainly be applied to dance training and creative process.

The BMC certification programs are, first and foremost, embodiment trainings. This means that the thrust of the program is directed towards deepening our awareness and understanding of the relationship between body and mind. This awareness and understanding is developed through touch, movement, cognitive study of anatomy and physiology and verbal dialogue. What is offered is an approach to embodiment; possible applications may be touched upon but are not a goal of the program. The applications of the work are left to the individual.

Somatic approaches to learning movement take a holistic versus mechanistic approach to training the body. Conventional dance training tends to rely on the mechanical repetition of exercises intended to train the musculoskeletal, cardiovascular and, ultimately (through repetition of movement patterns) nervous systems. Learning happens through imitating the teacher; classes are teacher-centered. In somatic disciplines, on the other hand, learning is student-centered and student-directed. Somatic learning stimulates the kinesthetic sense, relying on physical sensation as a source of learning and expression. Students learn to organize their attention around and receive feedback from their physical sensations in movement, rather than relying primarily on visual perception of external form. Shifting the emphasis to the dancer's own body as site and source of information and learning validates subjective, experiential knowledge, thus creating a new paradigm for movement education.

This new paradigm embraces the eastern concept of 'mind', which does not objectify the body or separate body from mind. This shift is revolutionizing how we approach the whole concept of 'training' the body. It stimulates reflection on the how of learning, not only the what – process versus product. Learning becomes a process of research and self-discovery, which takes place in the student's own bodymind, in her own time.

I am not suggesting that somatic practices should replace tried-and-true methods of technical training. However, perhaps new educational paradigms can inform conventional forms and methods of training so that they can continue to evolve to meet the demands of a field which is changing fast.

Body-Mind Centering: expanding our options

As a student at the modern dance department of the Theaterschool of Amsterdam in the early eighties, I spent a lot of time lying on the floor in "constructive rest position", sensing my skeleton, as a preparation for movement research and improvisation. My teacher of these Release Technique classes, John Rolland (a student of Barbara Clark, one of those who carried on and developed the work of Mabel Ellsworth Todd), gave us simple but effective images of our bones and deep muscles – images which, over time, effectively repatterned how we moved. In Todd's work this process is known as Ideokinesis. Of course, some students were bored by all this or simply fell asleep on the floor! But for whatever reasons, it worked for me.

It was much later, after immersing myself in the study of BMC, that I realized that my dance training had had a strong preference for the skeletal system which, combined with my own natural

preferences, had resulted in an imbalance in my perceptions of my body. Although I had learned to embody the clarity and lightness of my bones and joints, I missed a sense of mass, 3-dimensionality and strength. I was often tired and easily injured. My dancing lacked the vitality of the muscles, the volume of the organs, the intensity of the glands. For I discovered, while exploring these systems in the BMC program, that they were 'in the shadow', to quote Bonnie quoting Carl Jung. And so it goes with everyone who studies BMC: you soon discover which body systems are like home base and which are hiding in the shadow, present yet not being expressed.

Thus the study of BMC became about filling in gaps in my physicality, in my ways of thinking, feeling, being and expressing in the world.

The body is an intelligent community of cells, of tissues, of body systems. As with any community, it functions best when the work is shared, when each member is used efficiently and has enough opportunity to rest and recuperate. When we always rely on the same body system/ tissue/ group of cells, eventually it will break down. Injuries occur. We then compensate elsewhere for the weakness, which eventually causes new problems.

BMC can help dancers to become more fully aware and embodied in all of our tissues, systems and motor patterns. By expanding our range of choices when we initiate movement, we can find more balance and freedom through utilizing more of our bodies, more efficiently and with more subtlety and specificity of expression.

This can manifest in many ways. In a technique class, for example, as the ability to differentiate the deep rotator muscles from the gluteals from the pelvic floor, or as embodying the difference between the scapula-ribs articulation and the articulation of the glenohumeral (shoulder) joint. For someone who struggles with rhythm, it can mean discovering how to access the arterial rhythm of the blood, for another dancer who lacks qualities of lightness and suspension, exploring the mind and movement quality of the cerebrospinal fluid or the developmental reach of the head and tail can be just the ticket.

Different learning styles

How each of us learns is highly individual and creative. In BMC there is an attempt to represent and integrate different learning modes, giving us opportunities to learn with more of ourselves. For artists it can be especially important to understand that how we learn is intimately connected to how we perceive and create.

Some of us need to grasp a concept first before we can proceed, and for these people language can be essential; for others it is helpful to get visual input, as in seeing pictures or models of the physical structures being embodied. Others learn best through touch – it is the hands-on work that provides essential information and for still others it is primarily through the kinesthetic experience of moving that learning happens.

Recently I was teaching an intensive workshop at a Contact Improvisation festival in Germany. The subject of the workshop was Navel Radiation, or the 'starfish' pattern. This is a very early developmental movement pattern which occurs before we are born and underlies all possible coordinations of our 6 limbs (head, tail, arms and legs). Throughout the workshop I was referring to

the 'starfish body' and people were dancing like 6-limbed maniacs. After the workshop ended, at dinner I was talking with a young man from Berlin who had taken the workshop. He was amazed and delighted by the work, and especially taken with the 'starship' image. His English wasn't very good, and somehow he had managed to participate in all of the exercises and dances while thinking that we were working with the idea of 'starship dances'.

Somehow it had worked for him, regardless. He was open and curious. He had apparently received the 'transmission' from me, from the other dancers and through the exercises, without ever understanding cognitively what we were doing. This was a good lesson for me. I love science fiction. Perhaps in a future workshop we should explore 'starship dances'...

Some challenges of somatic dance learning

In many somatic approaches to movement training, such as Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique or most Release Techniques, the movement being learned is never demonstrated. The student receives information in the form of verbal instructions, images and/or touch. Initially, for many dancers it may be difficult to trust the resulting movement responses as you might trust your ability to imitate a movement which someone else is doing. It can take time to refine the kinesthetic sense and to learn to rely on the information we receive from the physical senses other than vision.

For example, in my classes I often use structures where dancers move with closed eyes as a way to develop kinesthetic awareness and to explore movement material. For some dancers it's initially challenging and even scary to move with closed eyes. Over time, early reflexes which help us to keep our balance and coordination without vision are reawakened, and students can become very confident and free while dancing 'blind'. With practice, this ability to focus on and develop very specific sensations and images in movement can be carried into dancing with eyes open, strengthening our potential to communicate subtle and differentiated physical and theatrical states to an audience.

I often see that people initially, with sensory work, become very internally focused and have trouble transitioning to a more motoric state of just doing the movement. They get stuck in observing their sensations. You could say that they get stuck in their CSF – the CSF (cerebrospinal fluid) is the fluid of the nervous system, and supports our sense perceptions.

When we sense our movement, our physical structures, our breath or the touch of our skin against the floor, there is a slowing down of our physiological rhythms as we become more parasympathetic, more inner-focused.

There is a conscious witnessing of information which is being taken in through the senses, and in this sensing state we need more time to respond.

Eventually, it's very important to let that sensing process go and just move, trusting the body to respond to the flow of incoming sensory information. At this point the sensing process goes unconscious, our attention comes back out and we can respond much more quickly to the environment. Bonnie calls this process feeling, as opposed to sensing, and says that this happens through the blood. In order to integrate what we have learned we have to let the sensing go and simply move. Therefore it is essential in somatic work that the goal of sensing be action.

Balancing sensing, feeling and action, inner and outer focus is always a major concern for me when I teach. Learning how to pay attention to the richly differentiated sensations and images inherent in our bodies and to follow these sources into dancing is one step. Knowing how to let go of sensing and just do it, to allow our experience and expression to transform, to be open to and communicate with the environment – other dancers and/or a public – is just as essential to the work.

Art versus therapy?

I am sometimes asked whether BMC is a creative technique, a therapy or even a form of contemplative practice. My answer is that it is none of the above... and, potentially, all of the above. Art, therapy and contemplative practice are all possible applications of the BMC work. Certainly, if one accepts the invitation to explore new ways of being embodied, there are discoveries awaiting which may challenge our assumptions or previous experience of who we are. This can potentially trigger a process of “personal growth”, which some would see as therapeutic and others may interpret as spiritual. Personally, I am not someone who feels the need to create strict boundaries for myself between these realms. It seems obvious that art-making has therapeutic effects, that therapy can be very creative and that both art and therapy have the potential to transform us in ways which many would describe as “spiritual”. Because of the way in which BMC addresses many different levels of the individual at once, the creative, the therapeutic and the spiritual can seem particularly entwined – I find this to be one of the beauties of the work.

However, in applying BMC material and principles to dance education, especially within the context of institutionalized learning, I am careful to be very clear about the intention and direction of the work. Fuzzy boundaries between creative process and personal growth work can be confusing to younger students and are threatening to institutions, at least institutions which depend on public funding and which have to regularly justify their existence to the powers-that-be. In my classes, explorations of BMC material and principles are contextualized in such a way that the goal is clearly to develop new ways of embodying and perceiving movement in order to expand the dancer’s choices in training, researching movement and creating dances.

Although there can be an overlapping of artistic and therapeutic experiences, the goals of each are distinctly different. While in therapy, self-exploration and expression can be a goal in and of itself, in an artistic process our aesthetic perception of the formed expression is equally important; there must be a dialogue between experience, expression and form.

Integrating BMC into dance training

In her article, *Toward a New Generation: Somatic Dance Education in Academia*, Sylvie Fortin identified the problem of transferring information from a somatic movement session to a dance technique class. From her own and other researchers’ observations of academic dance programs which include somatic classes she concludes that, in general, students who practice somatics outside of the dance class do not spontaneously change the way they work in conventional dance classes, unless that transfer of learning is cued and guided by the teacher.

Trude Cone, the artistic director of the School for New Dance Development, tried to create a new paradigm for that program based on the idea of a hologram. A hologram is a 3-dimensional image which can be viewed from any direction. Her idea was that the different subjects which make up the

program – namely, technique, improvisation, exploration, composition, theory and performance integration – are all interconnected aspects of an (ideally) integrated whole, that whole being the education of the dance maker. No one of these aspects can be addressed without acknowledging the influence of the others. This holistic approach to education is process- rather than product-oriented and supports the student-centered, somatic model of learning, as ultimately it is the dance maker who must find her own way of integrating the different aspects of the study, through the process of making dances.

Even in a program which is based on such holistic principles, there are seldom the resources available to facilitate the kind of dialogue between teachers which Fortin suggests is necessary for students to be able transfer learning from one environment to another. My own strategy for dealing with this issue has been, as much as possible, to facilitate that transference of learning within my classes.

The relationship between movement and touch

I am someone who responds profoundly to tactile information, and touch has been and continues to be an important tool in my development as a dancer. Perhaps that was why I was initially attracted to the practice of Contact Improvisation. Later, while a student in the BMC program, I was often frustrated in my need to move after receiving bodywork. I needed to “motor out” in order to complete the learning experience – to integrate new sensory information through movement.

In my own teaching then, I began to develop strategies for transitioning from bodywork into movement. In my classes, one is not usually left lying on the floor at the end of a hands-on exercise. Usually there is a phase, sometimes quite long, when the toucher continues to follow with the touch as the receiver takes her sensations into movement. This can also go into partnering work, but unless I am teaching a CI class, it usually resolves with the mover soloing as the toucher observes (and sometimes joins) her movement.

I feel that the phase when the mover simultaneously responds to the touch in movement and receives feedback about her movement through the touch, is very important in terms of repatterning. The touch helps us to reorganize our sensory attention and, as we respond to the touch, we get immediate feedback about our movement response. Thus the sensory-motor loop is complete; sensing, feeling and action are integrated in the dance. The same integration of touch and movement, and potential for repatterning, is found in the practice of Contact Improvisation.

Touch and movement are intimately linked; as infants we first learn to respond to the environment through our sense of touch. According to Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, movement is itself a sense perception, one that is traditionally excluded from “the 5 senses”. The vestibular nerve in the inner ear, which registers movement, is the first of the sensory nerves to develop in the fetus. As movement is the first sense perception to develop, it is obviously the most important for survival. Our perception of movement develops in close dialogue with our sense of touch. It helps to establish the process of how we perceive through all of our senses, and underlies our sense of who we are in the world.

The role of perception in learning and creating

“It is through our senses that we receive information from our internal environment (ourselves) and the external environment (others and the world). How we filter, modify, distort, accept, reject and use that information is part of the act of perceiving... Learning is the process by which we vary our responses to information based on the context of each situation... Through exploring the perceptual process, we can expand our choices in responding to ourselves, our environment and the world in which we live.” – Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen

Perception is a constant, cyclic process of sensing, perceiving and acting through which we learn. How we focus our senses on what it is we are to perceive patterns our interpretation of the sensory information. Without this active focusing, our perceptions remain poorly organized. And our responses are more likely to be unconscious and habitual, our choices limited.

I have often heard dancers complain that they feel stuck in their movement habits when they improvise and create. To my mind, the problem is not a lack of inventiveness or physical skill. The challenge is to come to the experience of moving fresh each time, with beginner’s mind – to open to the unknown. When we can cultivate the mind of curiosity and research, then we can be available for new discoveries, rather than ‘recognizing’ an experience as something we already know.

How do we perceive movement? Our own movement, someone else’s? If we are learning a phrase in a technique class, what do we see, which aspect of the movement do we pick up first? Is it the rhythm, the spatial directions, the movement patterns in the body, the movement qualities?

When we warm ourselves up, how do we know what our bodies need? Do we warm up differently for a ballet barre than we would for a Contact Improvisation jam? For our own rehearsal? For an improvised performance?

If we are in the process of creating a dance, how do we identify our physical experiences? When we want to retrieve a movement image we’ve just discovered, what is it we are retrieving? Perhaps the question is not so much what did we do, as how did we get there? What were we paying attention to at the time? How does our attention form our experience, shape our actions, limit or expand our choices?

The role of research in dance-making and performance

I am, above all, interested in cultivating the physical awareness and the perceptual tools which enable us to discover and develop new dance forms. To create movement expressions which are gorgeous in their specificity. This comes from the ability to follow, capture and craft new and unknown movement experiences as they emerge. To find new ways of perceiving, describing and structuring our experiences in the research/ compositional process.

Form can then become a distillation, a crystallization of experience. BMC can offer us a frame of reference – a language of experience in this distillation process.

BMC gives us tools which can help us to engage in the experiential research of human movement. These tools are: a highly differentiated physical awareness which enables the choreographer to access very specific physical states, qualities and motor patterns, and the ability not only to embody but also to identify and analyze these states, qualities and patterns, in both her own and other dancers' movement.

The ability to articulate and describe our experience of movement as well as our perceptions of others' movement is an important tool. Having a language which is based in common physical experience allows us to develop and craft new and specific forms for which we may have no previous frame of reference from conventional dance vocabulary. It allows us to teach new forms to others and direct them in the research process, and to discuss the movement which emerges – all essential skills in the collaborative process between choreographer and dancers.

A new sensibility in the theatre

What is “embodiment”? What is that magic which happens in performance when a performer is fully present in her physical experience, when sensing, feeling and action are integrated, when she is also open to the space, the audience, the present moment? I believe that this quality of embodiment in performance creates a resonance between the performer, the space and the public. When this happens in performance I feel as if I am a part of the dance, that I am invited into the performer's world. My own awareness is expanded in this meeting with the performer.

It seems that there is a new sensibility gradually evolving in the realm of movement art and performance. Many movement artists are now exploring the expression of body-mind states which are highly specific, subtle and surprising. They are developing forms for performance which are uniquely personal, and which often challenge conventional assumptions about what dance is, or even what performance is.

We are performing the body, giving the body more space to speak for itself.

How we conceive of and perceive the body in the theatre is changing. The body as site of research, as medium of communication between performer and public. The body as intelligent community of cells, as fish-amphibian-reptile-mammal, as an evolutionary work-in-progress. If one believes that every cell has ‘mind’, that every tissue can initiate movement, then the moving body becomes a very different thing. And we must also see it differently – as public we are stretched to engage with performance in new ways.

The body is no longer just the dancer's ‘instrument’. The medium can also be the message.

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