

Bringing the improvisation and somatic approaches to the dance class for people with PD

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When I started to give dance classes for people with Parkinson's disease, what struck me the most at that time was the gap between how the different bodies were expressing themselves (in volume, muscle tone etc.) and the intended effort which I saw in the faces of the dancers. All of the dancers were very hard workers, who wanted always more engagement of the muscles, more sweat. They wanted to be brought to the movement and to a feeling that they are in movement, but when they saw themselves in the mirror mostly they were disappointed how poor their dance movements come across.

Suddenly I had a realization that probably many people in a regular dance class work on the same issue: to train the steps and sequences (and by that the muscles and the whole movement apparatus) so that the body appears to go fluently through the space. One dancer from my class described it as that the class works on his body the same as putting a new oil in the car. This was nice and positive thought in essence, and it made me think what are the further relationships between the body, the "I" and the ambition: what is triggering what, who is the demanding one in that constellation and so on. In a dance class for people with PD it is usually "the I" which demands something on the body and the body is not always responding or responding inadequately. The dancers describe it as frustrating, depressive, hopeless and other words, all in all not very happy relationship.

As a response to that, I thought improvisation tasks are then the perfect solution for this: it's based more on the thought of following the body, rather than demanding something on the body; everybody can adjust his dance according to his possibilities; it's leading towards research of own mobility and movement expression. My proposal was to shift the use of the body from a driving vehicle for "the I", which is deciding about aims, goals and motivations towards the body which is co-responsible for the pathways towards the goals and ambitions. This focus is then followed by engaging more the inner eye for getting to know yourself.

In the beginning I didn't know exactly how to bring improvisation tasks into the class, because everything other in that class was very solid: demand on training the core muscles, stability exercises, coordination exercises, etc. All that stood in contrast to freedom of improvisation. In addition to that, I was confronted hard with the fact that if the dancers don't know how to relate that kind of task towards their bodies, the bodies are even more confused than usually. Slowly through practice I understood that there has to be always a keyword which will anchor physically and can be always related tangibly to own body (working with specific body part, with type of muscle engagement, with body shape and so on). Proposals, where the body got lost in the imagination of the mind almost never worked and I understood I can never leave the dancer "just to dance" without giving him a clear clue how his body does relate to the proposed task.

We could suggest in this context following consequence:

How a body relates to a proposed task is expressed by **movement quality** of the body.

Movement quality of the body we can evaluate on:

work with time, rhythm

work with space

work with weight

work with effort

including phenomena's as impulse, materialization of a shape, sustained quality, tension, power, open and close, extremities in the expression, focus, concentration

Movement quality is supported/carried by **motivation**, in the sense of: how do we awake the physical trigger for connecting the body with the desired quality:

imagination of spatial (including planes of movements) determination

imagination of time determination

imagination of weight determination

use of body layers (skin, muscles, bones, fluids)

embodiment of shape

embodiment of level of effort

embodiment of a process, development

expressing a music

expressing a poem, word, story

expressing inner imagery

expressing a character

including tools helping to carry the motivation as use of music, props, objects

By motivating the body towards executing a different qualities we are achieving **the goals** of dance classes for people with PD:

on a physical level:

reduction of rigidity

improved spinal rotation

improved contra-lateral movement of the body

core strength, stability

efficient weight transfer, balance

increasing amplitude of the movement, flexibility

control on fluidity of the movements

reducing of tremor

opening of the front part of the body

awaken facial muscles

support for breath and use of voice

on an emotional/personal/relationship level

joy and fun

possibility of self-expression

freedom
engaging with the others, overcoming isolation
experience of contact - through touch, through shared interest, shared movement quality
motivation
creativity, inspiration, imagination
respecting others and the differences
self-esteem, self-worth, dignity in context of the group
appreciating and respecting the others

With the time I observed certain relationships of those three categories: movement quality, motivation and the goal.

The class itself unfolds from motivations. The more clear motivation the leader proposes the more clear movement quality it triggers in the dancers. While dancers are experiencing the movement quality, it's beneficial to name the quality and how is it changing in the process. However, usually it didn't work for me as a leader to start from naming the qualities themselves expecting that this alone will trigger the body of the dancer. It is very rare that I would speak in the class about the goals of the movement proposals and tasks as mentioned above. That is more a guideline for the leader while preparing the class to help him be more specific in what is he going to do with his dancers. The information about the goal is telling nothing about which movement quality is the leader choosing to achieve his goal and as well cannot be switched for the motivation for the movement.

Having those principles and observations in mind, I can propose an overview (or a certain methodology) of motivations for improvisation tasks during such a class.

Starting from imagery for external space

By imagery using different aspects of external space we can think of images where the density of the outside environment changes: jungle forest to cut through, water or honey to go through, vacuum on the Moon to move through, deep sand to wade through with the legs and so on. These types of images serve to trigger various engagement of muscle tone and different dynamics of the movement. In my experience those are the most accessible tasks to introduce improvisation in the class.

Another type of proposal concerning exploring the outer space can be placing an imaginary camera on certain part of the body (finger, toe, knee, elbow, and so on) and first explore the space around own body; later we can take this proposal and let the specific body part lead the whole body in the space.

Another proposal very useful for the training of fine motor skills is modulating the energy between our hands / imaginary material we are holding into specific shapes and landscapes, which we can hand over to a neighbor in the circle, who will continue in forming the material.

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Imagery for internal space

Those proposals are probably a bit more challenging and in my experience can be emotionally charged in different ways for different people.

We can start from work with the inner volume of the body, which we can introduce through finding the volume of the body cavities through breath. Breathing into full expansion of lungs or to the belly helps to find the extremes of these spaces, the experience of rigidity or collapse of inner space. Next step could be finding different cavities (inside of the skull, inside of the ribcage, the pelvis as a bowl) and let a small ball roll in the cavity, first regular round movement and later we can introduce, that by giving the ball a small impulse we can send it to very different trajectories around this body cavity. We can change the size of the ball, which will lead to different movement dynamics and muscle effort.

Another type of proposal is work with the layers and architecture of the body. If we peel layer after layer from our body, each layer can propose a different movement quality. The layer of skin make us focus on movement through the space, where the skin wants to experience how it's touched by the air; the quality is very light, effortless, can have different time dynamics. The layer of muscles makes us experiences own elasticity, muscle effort, possibility of going against resistance. Concerning the movement quality, it has to do a lot with the effort: we can squeeze, press, push, contract; it can result to very loaded quality. With layer of bones we can focus on functional structuring of different body positions, we can explore the degree of the support versus degree of mobility which joints create for us. The movement quality of this layer can be lighter and there can be involved work with the weight and how to support it. In general exploration in the realm of layers can be very interesting for dancers who naturally tend to use certain layer more than the others (this depends on certain body type, on which experiences we went through in life and how do we deal with them). By overusing for example the layer of muscles one is faster tired, cannot deal with longer period of effort and so on; by overusing a skin layer one can have a problem to develop powerful impulse or create a resistance. This proposal can open different views on the way how to deal with own body tissue and how to balance own activity patterns.

Possibly special group creates the work with body fluids as described in Body-Mind Centering® approach. BMC describes seven types of body fluids (blood, lymph, synovial fluid, cerebrospinal liquor, cellular fluid and interstitial fluid) and proposes the movement based on series of imagery, through which the body connects to the way of flow of a specific fluid. During a class I did propose to work with the energy of blood: the differences between arterial, venous and capillary blood and to my surprise that was very accessible proposal for the dancers. I can imagine working with the synovial fluid which finds place in between two joints and can have a great undulating effect on the joints. Some of the fluids are for a dancer uninformed about BMC maybe too far from an immediate imagination and would need a deeper exploration.

Another type of proposals we could describe as work with abstract body points and lines in order to explore ways how different body segments organize themselves in integration. By this we can think of proposals, where the dancer draws imaginary line between two voluntary

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chosen points of the body (for example right elbow, left hipbone) and the range of the task goes from: to move this line in space, to make the line shorter, longer, to stretch the line as much as possible, to bend it, make it straight, twist it and so on towards giving freedom: to deform the line in any way in space. The similar type of proposal can be choosing a spot of the body, which is fixed in the space and rest of the body can move around and organize itself according to this movement. The aim of those proposals is to find a finer segmentation of the specific body parts (the trunk, the arm, the leg) and find an inner mobility within these sections as well. Next to that we are as well training the functional consequences necessary in the body as it reacts on specific impulse. There are many variations on these proposals. What works very well is to work in the couple for these proposals; one person determines through touch the point or two points for the line and keeps the hands on for easier imagination, the second person is moving according to the proposal and the roles switch later. Due to the fact that there is touch involved in these proposals, we might want to use this proposal a bit later in the buildup of the group.

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Proposals for relationship between physical form and feeling / emotion

In this chapter we focus on triggering and distinguishing a feeling / emotion by a body engagement and possibly the other way around. The attention doesn't go so much to provoke somebody into an emotional reaction, but more to observe what there already is: to acknowledge which movement qualities / body positions are close to me, far from me, pleasurable or not pleasurable to me and which element concerning the body creates this edge to it. Another layer of these proposals can be simply developing the associative stream between movement and feeling and by that enriching the imagination vocabulary for triggering movement.

We can think of proposals like memory work: the dancer thinks of a memory, something from a day and then place this memory to different part of the body (knee, belly, feet and so on). He lets the impulse of this energy play out on that part of the body. In this way each dancer can create and collect several short dances and possibly share them with the group.

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A variation on this proposal is a body storytelling, where we give freedom to a part of the body or whole body to express the current impulse of energy in a short form; each dancer can share his storytelling in the circle.

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We can touch the theme of form and feeling in a group work as well: for example by proposal where one dancer offer his body as a material to be formed and other two dancer modulate this body into specific shape (with big movements as well as small details), they keep forming till they reached the perfect sculpture. After that, the modulated person can verbalize for himself or his group how does this position make him feel, what is he reminded of, is it pleasurable / not pleasurable position or similar.

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Proposals concerning the theme “get to know yourself”

With this group of proposals I mean generally the work with mirroring and shadowing. The element of “get to know yourself” I see mostly in how the dancers approach the given task. The task of mirroring is known to be used for training the alertness, the attention and reactivity. Here we focus more on the fact, that the leading dancer can observe his one movement patterns, effort, and eventually limits mirrored on the body of someone else. Sometimes it brings surprising observations concerning own muscle tension, use of fingers, shoulder position and so on. For the following dancer the benefit would be the broadening of his own movement language and learning new patterns. There are many variations working with mirroring and shadowing, here I mention couple of possibilities which worked in context of classes for Parkinson dancers very well.

The basic proposal would be the classical mirroring in couple, where one dancer is leading and the other one following. For groups, where more direct (tactile) motivation is needed for a start, we can propose to begin from always touching with one finger and develop the mirrored movement from there. We can limit the range of body parts for this proposal: for example only for face, for legs, for fingers and so on.

Next parameter we can add is the volume of the movement. This is very nice variation, for the groups where the differences in mobility of the dancers are big, but we still want to give everybody the space to engage fully within his own possibilities. In this case the leader is producing a movement and the following dancer follows with the engaged body parts, the intension and the direction of the movement, but makes the range of the movement smaller or bigger according to what the task is. It’s beautiful to see that this proposal works both ways: when the follower decides to make the volume even bigger (for 150%), he works with intensity and maximum movement range; if he decide to make the movement range on 50% or even 10%, those are very interesting qualities where usually the muscles can relax more and the general movement of the body gets lighter.

Another a bit more advanced, but very amusing and playful variation can be to use the principle of mirroring with the translation into other body level: for example leader moves only in his face and the follower translate this in his body, leader produces movement only with hands and arms and follower mirror this with his legs and feet and so on.

The basic proposal for shadowing would be similar to the mirroring in a couple where one is the leader and the follower shadows his movement. Very nice variation on this proposal (which the dancers always like to watch as well) is, when we make a row of several shadow followers behind the leader and in that way there is an image of movement echo created.

A bit advanced variation on this proposal would be inserting a “window of inspiration”. “Window of inspiration” is a moment for the shadow follower to go astray from his leader and follow his own creative impulse for couple of moments (it can be a second, or half a minute). This type of proposal comes very close to fully own creation, because the follower is responsible for following the impulse for his own inspiration and he is responsible for the timing of this impulse. However with some preparations, those are very valuable moments, where we can let groups of dancers spontaneously create small performances for each other in the frame of class.

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For shadowing we can again apply the element of volume, which can bring up very interesting and unexpected movement qualities.

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In some cases, I noticed, it was very difficult to break the shyness of a dancer to “just produce a movement” in the role of the leader. There, it was very helpful to introduce the production of the movement by an object: an apple, a ball or similar and first formulate the proposal as: let’s form a group, where each dancer has an apple in his hands and let’s make the apples do an unison dance together. In that case one dancer is the leader, leading the movement with the apple and the rest of the group follows, after some time can the leader give the leadership to somebody else. This kind of proposal is more concrete for the body, which is making a trajectory of the object in the space. The attention of the mind goes to the object, but the body is of course fully involved. Next step would be to create the trajectory for a specific body part (hand, elbow and so on) instead of the object, then to freely switch the leading body parts and from there we can take a step to the freedom of “producing a movement”.

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Methodology of touch

There are many creative dance proposals involving touch. The touch and tactile motivation in general can be very useful to the body, but for some dancers it can evoke insecurity or even be intimidating if used without care. What is first important thing: if the leader of the class is not comfortable with introducing a contact proposal in the class, it will probably raise some questions amongst the dancers as well. If the leader of the class introduces the touch as one of the possible tools how to motivate the body to dance, usually it’s perceived so by the whole group. Nevertheless, to make a smooth and safe build up of dance in contact, we can have a look at different possibilities and stages of those proposals.

I made several general observations:

- It feels the most natural and safe to start the touch first at distal body parts (fingers, arms) and from there go more central, where the body needs a bit more trust to allow the touch.
- It is easier to introduce the element of touch first in the group, for example holding hands in a circle where the focus is brought more to the element of “togetherness” rather than on the physical contact itself. Once this feels safe, we can introduce to work in smaller groups or couples.
- It helps to introduce the contact element first in proposals, where the goal and attention lies actually somewhere else: for example holding hands in the circle and by the squeeze of a hand giving over the good energy for the neighbor; or holding hands in the circle for the support and stability and let the feet and legs dance around; later the same proposal in a couple.

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Special type of proposals concerning attention on touch without the touch itself is the work with negative spaces. The basic proposal would be that one of the dancer freeze in the movement and another dancer than enter with his movements the in between spaces of the frozen dancer. A very favorite variation of this proposal is to divide the whole group of dancers to two groups, where one group creates a frozen network of the bodies and another group is finding its way through this network; we can switch the roles after. Later we can vary

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the basic proposal, that the both bodies are entering each other's negative spaces while moving.

Once the touch is introduced as an organic part of class (for example by engagements described above), we can introduce proposals, where the dancer needs to dive deeper and put his attention on the way of making the contact itself.

We can start from the simple touch of finger on finger: finger of leading dancer on finger of the following dancer, through the leading dancer they can explore the space together; after roles change.

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As a next step we can work with the touch of the finger of the leading dancer on some other body part of the following dancer (elbow, head, neck, hip...) and explore the space in the same way. As an advanced variation, we can try the same setting (finger on finger, finger on other body part) and switch the leadership between each other without the words during the dance. There we are adding the element of flexibility and listening.

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Another way how to engage the touch of fingers on different body parts in very non-invasive manor is the proposal mentioned above: by one or two fingers propose a spot / an imaginary line across the body and the dancer is organizing the movement around the spot / deforming this line. Here the fingers serve more as a reminder and still have *passive role*.

reference
prop. 8,9

From there we can move on to the touch, which is *actively manipulating*. For example proposal in couples with one "giver" and one "listener", where the giver is giving an impulse by his hand (which can differ in direction, intensity, range of body part) and the listener is following the impulse and organizing the rest of his moving body according to that. This proposal has many variations, where we can play with elements of going with the stream of impulse or against; we can layer several impulses simultaneously; we can broaden the range of impulse from only tactile to a vocal or sound impulse as well, where the interpretation of these impulses depends purely on the listener and his reaction. Another example of active manipulation is mentioned above as the modulation proposal.

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The proposals described till here are relatively safe, because of the clear role distribution: the dancer placing the fingers or hands has still an objective overview of the situation and can adjust his choices according to how the body of the follower or listener reacts. Following proposals are working with the *bodies* in couples or group *as equal partners* and the dancers are thrown in the situation where they are simultaneously proposing and reacting. By that they are creating the experiences for each other instantly. Here we are crossing the line of the objective overview. Those proposals are suitable when the energy of the group is calmer and open to receive the body contact fully.

As an example we can use one of the proposals of mirroring, where the two dancers always stay in touch with one point of the body and this point can move from body part to body part (by fingers, palms, elbows, shoulders, through the back and so on). Variation on this proposal is to loose for a moment the mirroring element and work with the image of a small soft ball which we hold by the common contact point. This ball is then moved according to how the two bodies create the sliding contact point together.

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Another proposal opening the sensitivity can be in the couple, where the two dancers stand by the back to each other, leaning and giving a bit of a support to each other. Nobody is a leader

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or follower there, but through the action of giving the weight to each other or finding the full contact with the other the subtle movement starts which both dancers can follow.

With the previous proposal we are moving towards probably the most challenging version of touch - *work with giving the weight* to each other. This is very challenging for dancers with PD because their natural stability is very fragile already and the fear for falling can be big. We are not working towards very extreme results here, but more towards a realization that certain positions are more stabilizing than others and that it is possible to give part of the weight of the body away and still be in balance.

Those proposals include work in couples where the dancers can first hang with the weight from their holding hands and from there slowly going through the space; another variation of this can be done in the circle, where the group can lean out of the circle being supported by the hands holding each other. Similar with leaning in couples against each other with palms and from there going slowly to space; variation again in the circle where the group can lean towards inside the circle thanks to the resistance of the others. With leaning in or out we pay attention on a good spread base of legs and on the space which the dancers are claiming from each other (“how much do I push or pull the other?”).

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prop.35, 36

Feel free to bring variations to all of those proposals according to what the group needs (sitting version, different preparation for specific proposals and so on). It is always worth to follow what comes up spontaneously from the group and the atmosphere, those moments are maybe the most valuable and connecting moments in the class.