

UCLan

MA Dance & Somatic Wellbeing:

Connections to the living body

**Module: Somatic Education &
Co-Creation with Clients**

DA4008 (L7)

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WHAT IS SME?

‘[T]he body of life’ (1980: 5-6) is an expression from philosopher Thomas Hanna in his book of the same title. He gives rise to the fact that the living body or soma has the capacity for self-awareness.

Pause: I invite you to stroke your face with your hands. Now take your hands away and tune into the awoken sensations.



Through touch we can come directly into our nervous system and be self-aware. There is a neural network which extends throughout the whole body. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen in her 1993 and 2008 book *Sensing, Feeling and Action* explores this network of central and peripheral nervous systems, neuroendocrine, neuro-enteric and neuro-cellular networks.

The body not only perceives itself but can make decisions and for this reason the ‘alive body is capable of healing and self-regulation’ (Eddy 2017: 16). However, for myself and my clients the Western culture in which we live fails to give value to the sensate body and its ability to self-regulate and heal. Rather it teaches us to ignore body-signals (Eddy 2017) in favour of an external validation of self, such as the moulding of the body to meet the outer expressions of work uniform and fashion. In a moving account of how her interpreter in

Macedonia wore to work State regulation shoes which hurt and made her feet bleed; Miranda Tufnell in her essay *Beneath Our Words* notes how external bodily expectations create daily habits which ‘bind and restrict our bodies’ (2000: 26). In such instances the inner sensate voice, the inner authenticity has been suppressed and the living body answers to the authorities of society. Don Hanlon Johnson in his book *Body: Recovering Our Sensual Wisdom* talks on the power of these outer authorities and reveals how they become ‘woven into our bone marrow, causing us to behave like machines rather than self-regulating organisms’ (1992: 17).

Pause: Tune into your body and discover a way to be more comfortable.

SME offers a way of tuning into bodily signals, messages and wisdom. Martha Eddy in her book *Mindful Movement* offers a definition of SME as ‘the experience of bringing attention to the living body while in stillness and moving’ (2017: 6). When people bring attention to their living bodies’ they have access to the potential power of their body for healing, self-regulation and authenticity. From here they can experience empowerment and self-agency in the way in which they live their lives.

SME Pioneers:

Within the history of SME pioneers and practitioners, European antecedent Elsa Gindler (1885-1961) identified the fact that as a culture we fail to lead our lives thoughtfully or sensitively, but life has become rushed lacking the stillness required for the readiness of appropriate response to any stimulus. In her writing ‘Gymnastik for People Whose Lives are Full of Activity’ in *Bone Breath & Gesture* edited by Don Hanlon Johnson (1995) she noted

that her students began to feel they were in charge of their own bodies through the conscious awareness of simple movements done slowly.

Pause: Slowly raise and lower one arm, bringing awareness to how it feels and moves.

The Feldenkrais Method

Gaining a sense of authority within my own body through simple repeated movements, I have found within the Awareness through Movement work of Moshe Feldenkrais (1904- 1984). Feldenkrais was one of the eight founders of SME and Hanna was one of his students (Eddy 2017). In his work emphasis is given to subtle movement nuances from which we can make movement choices and be instrumental in the conscious creating of our own lives (Feldenkrais 1977).



Exploration is often done lying on the floor and then integrated into sitting and standing. The prolonged consistent contact with the earth's support without its gravitational pull has enabled me to yield, rest, and feel safe enough to listen to my internal bodily rhythms; a re-orientation from an early-life experience of abandonment and abuse. From this inner listening, there has grown kinaesthetic awareness, my evolving presence which as practitioner I bring to the process of co-creation with clients.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS OF CO-CREATION?



Co-creation is a journey which two people the SME practitioner and client make together. Each bring and share their personal journey in trust and companionship. Without judgement both are open to whatever emerges. They may discover space for reflection or rest. They may desire reanimation and renewed enjoyment of life. They may find greater self-awareness and symbolic processing. Jill Hayes in her book *Soul and Spirit in Dance Movement Psychotherapy* describes such a journey that is made offering the fool and child as companions.

‘They walk together, trusting the intuitive, the foolish and the childlike. They seek to find realities which may remain hidden from conscious personality, which has learnt to trust only what it sees with the naked eye. The fool and the child see differently. They feel the truth of the body and imagination. They are able to bring this truth back from hidden places of the mind, back to the waking world where intuitive knowledge can be put into practice. This partnership is respectful, empowering and egalitarian; the fool and the child walk the path together. The partnership trusts in human contact, in collaboration and honours the agency of both partners. The fool and the child [...] commit to travel together with open hearts, because it is through open-hearted contact that creative life can be found and encouraged’ (2013: 54).

In a similar vein to Hayes, Amanda Williamson in her article *Formative Support and Connection: somatic movement dance education in community and client practice* articulates some of the key features of SME.

Whereas Hayes talks of walking together in trust and open-hearted contact, Williamson notes that heart-felt connection brings about trust and openness between the SME practitioner and client. It is for this reason that in SME connection to heart is nurtured as it allows for the exploration of ‘a quality of humanness and companionship with heart-felt presence’ (2009: 37).

Pause: Let’s take a moment to connect to our own hearts.

Hayes describes the practitioner and client partnership as respectful, empowering and egalitarian. This allows for the agency of both travellers towards their own sense of self-discovery. Likewise, Williamson stresses the importance of gentle self-reflexive processes in SME which support ‘the capacity for personal agency to direct and/or redirect our lives [...] *helping us to actively participate in the world, discover more about ourselves, and make changes if called to do so*’ (ibid: 39).

Hayes highlights the importance of body and imagination while Williamson explains that across the field of SME ‘the imagination is viewed as an extension and expression of sensate experience’ (ibid: 40). Imagination is a valuable resource within the co-creation process as brought to the surface is intuitive knowledge that can support the client within their life and can be a main contributor towards making life changes. For example, a client in my own practice, who has fibromyalgia, found that her arms became wings which she used to fly above the pain she was experiencing. This opens the doorway to my three co-creation clients two of which come to my weekly group SME sessions and one annually to an outdoor

workshop. All have given permission for their sessions to be spoken about, their names used, and the photographs taken to be shown.

SESSIONS with John Fullwood:



Tuning In:

Penny Collinson in the article *Re-sourcing the Body: Embodied Presence and self-care in working with others* suggests tuning into the clients before they arrive saying ‘I imagine in to them – opening to whatever comes back to me’ (2015: 231). When I did this prior to my first session with John this image from an outdoor workshop several years ago immediately came to mind. Firstly, I was drawn to a warm stirring sensation around my heart which made my arms tingle. Then I became aware of what was hidden, that which was not revealing itself, where were John’s legs? Finnegan-Clarke in the article *Can a two-person enquiry made through co-created movement reveal a profound sense of interconnectivity in the therapy room?* offers the phrase ‘forgotten limbs’ (2015: 34).

This initial imagining in offered me a grounding sense of presence when John arrived for the first session. I already felt in-tune with him as he described his recurrent experience of nagging pains, tingles and stiffness near his coccyx in his left hip. As the session unfolded, he became aware that he hardly moved his feet at all and there was a lack of desire of his legs to

move around the room which he found frustrating as he was a very active person enjoying modern jive and 5 rhythms dance and walking on the moors. Drawing on the experiential anatomy of Bainbridge Cohen's Body-Mind Centering we took time to develop our self-awareness, self-knowledge and self-education of the lower body through pictures and diagrams of the pelvis, legs and feet. In this he became aware that he had difficulty connecting to his bones, which awoke in me my own experience, through the work of Linda Hartley (1995) and Liz Koch (2012), how when focus is brought to the sensation of bone perception can shift from *doing* and *trying* to *being* and *connecting*. Connecting with my own bones would support John in accessing his own experience of bone.

Touch and Memory:

Our exploration provided an opportunity to introduce touch work. With a sense of curiosity and discovery we contacted the different leg bones on each other. Katy Dymoke in her essay *Touch a Natural Language* illuminates that touch 'awakens many aspects of the self, this includes memory, feelings, desire for relationship, reassurance, security and comfort' (2000: 84). At the end of the session John held his right foot. He talked of how as a youngster he underwent a skin-graft operation. The skin from under his feet was used for reconstructing his harelip. It left his feet feeling tender and he has since placed a protective barrier between himself and the earth; he never goes barefoot.

Personal Resonance:

As a SME practitioner, taking time after the facilitation session to reflect and feel its resonance is very important. I was deeply moved by what John had told me. There had been a strong urge to want to tenderly hold his feet, but that did not feel appropriate. The ISMETA Code of Ethics/Standards of Practice recognise the nature of intimacy that may emerge

through the recalling of memories in sessions. Now alone I started to explore my own feet and found that I had a tenderness towards them as though they were baby's feet. I touched and soothed them. They warmed and softened to the touch.

Pause: Take a few moments to give your feet some attention.



When I returned home, I was inspired to create prints of my feet. One pair embracing the texture of skin and another pair of the rocky support of bones in my feet. I felt like I was unfolding more to the experience of my own feet which would feed my future sessions with John deepening my presence within the co-creation journey. Additionally, the artwork would now become part of my session anatomy picture resource and offer a more personal layer of expression to my usual anatomical diagrams.

Outer to Inner Authority:

John spoke of how prior to these co-creation sessions he had been dealing with pain and discomfort in his left hip saying,

'I have put a great focus on doing exercises to make myself "better", zealously striving for greater core strength, better able to sit comfortably with legs outstretched, more able to touch my toes. It hasn't worked! Instead I've been in a cycle of gradual improvement followed by sudden injury and relapse'.

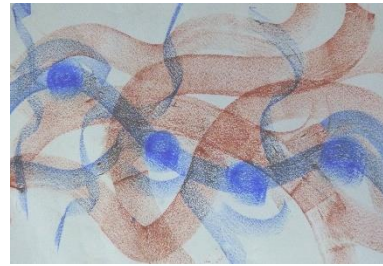
John was familiar with external rhythms such as music to dance to and diagnosis with prescribed exercises to try and put things right. SME as stated by the ISMETA Scope of Practice is not about diagnosing or prescribing for medical conditions. John through our co-creation sessions was listening into his own bodily sensations and how this could be a place of wisdom and resource for him. This was supported through light and fun activities which encouraged spontaneity and creativity whereby John had a sense of agency in our journey together; that it was fun, co-active and co-creative.



During the deepening emergence phases of these sessions, after moving with John at times in contact touch and at times without, I moved to the side of the room and became witness drawing on Authentic Movement a somatic practice derived from the Jungian concept of expressing the unconscious and developed by Mary Whitehouse (Levy 1992). The developing of his 'inner witness' (Adler: 2005: 260), being able to track his movement supported John's awareness of his inner authority and ability to self-resource. John reflected on the first of these moving and being witnessed experiences saying,

'I was moving around the room, moving with my whole body, continually listening to how my body wanted to move. No music! This is ground-breathing for me as I'm used to moving to music and lack the confidence in listening to my body and know how it wants to move.'

Moving through Resistance with Moving and Drawing:



A powerful learning moment arose in journeying into one of John's strong resistances drawing. In our first session on noticing the art materials in the studio John exclaimed,

'I hope you're not expecting me to draw!'

During session two we were in bodily contact and moving to the movement impulses which arose between us. Towards the end of this moving time, I recalled Tufnell & Crickmay's words 'a curving river of spine' (1990: 10) from their book *Body, Space Image* and I started drawing. I invited John to make some marks on some of the studio paper which he did saying afterwards,

'curves appeared on my paper, my brain did not have a clue what was happening'

Following the work of Daria Halprin in her book *The Expressive Body in Life, Art and Therapy: Working with Movement, Metaphor and Meaning* (2003), I introduced the process of moving-drawing-moving and we moved in response to our own drawings. Following this John commented that

'Wow! Would you believe it. I found myself moving freely and fluidly around the room, both on my feet and rolling, aches and pains forgotten'

John's image of curves seemed to have created in him what Gintis in *Engaging the Movement of Life: Exploring Health and Embodiment Through Osteopathy and Continuum* calls 'a fluid

resonance’ (Gintis 2007: 82). It enabled him to discover a fluidity of movement after a sustained period of pain and stiffness.

John’s Images:



John continued to draw in the remaining two sessions. Between sessions three and four, when there was an extended time period before the final session, alone at home, he followed the moving-drawing-moving process and created these pictures which he said tracked his journey of increased fluidity. Yet each image had a life of its own. From an active volcano to a mobile creature no longer fixed to the earth. John was introducing me to ‘image dialoguing’ (McNiff 1992: 109). This conscious move through my client’s resistance not only offered him new bodily experience and creative expression, but brought me into a new exploration.

SESSIONS with Pauline Dyer:

Drawing as a reflective process, Collinson in her article *Re-sourcing the Body: Embodied presence and self-care in working with others* suggests ‘offers a valuable process to bring into consciousness what is naturally arising in the body’ (2015: 232). Pauline a local visual and environmental artist asked whether she could spontaneously draw during our first session together. Firstly, she drew after requested touch to her head.



When I initially give intentional touch to a client through the hands the contact is often light and more like a listening hand. Tufnell in the book *When I Open My Eyes: Dance Health Imagination* offers the words ‘gentle... as snow falling...gentle... as rain’ (2017: 46). There is a sense for me of not making an imprint but receiving the essence of what is beneath and being open to receptivity. Then I follow by asking what quality of touch the client would like and for Pauline the request was for the quality of the touch to be firmer. The strong clear image drawn echoes for me Pauline’s bodily experience of touch and what firm pressure provided. In her own words she said,

‘when you increased the pressure of touch, it felt so right, like I was... had substance’.

Pause: Give firm touch to one arm and light touch to the other. Be aware of the difference that each quality of touch offers.

Moving in Contact:

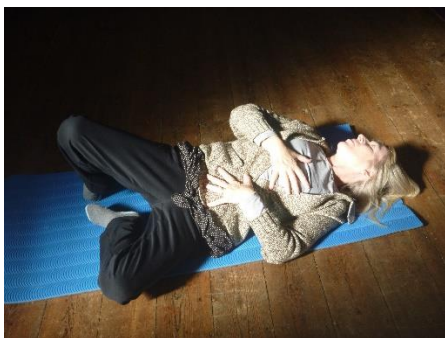


After drawing she lay down and I asked her if I could join her on the floor and see what might emerge. My left foot turned meeting Pauline's ankle. She rolled to her side and my ribcage nestled into her shoulder. In and out of the sun's rays we slowly rolled, finding our individual stillness while being awoken to different body areas in contact with each other. Afterwards Pauline drew again adding a connecting spinal cord to her brain image. Circles like joining cells then emerged; there was for me a sense of dropping into the cellular intelligence of the body. Pauline said of her experience of moving in contact

'I was connected to the warmth of another human being. It was not flat and hard like the floor below me, but instead yielded and contoured my body, I felt I was fitting into it.'

This session not only reaffirmed my sense of how important appropriate touch through dialogue is in SME, but how time for reflection in this instance drawing reveals what is organically arising within the body and acknowledges the remaining resonance.

Rest & Recuperation/Enteric Nervous System/A Safe Place:



Taking time to slow down and rest was an important theme throughout Pauline's sessions. When she arrived for this first one, she was feeling rushed and flustered as her, 90 year-year-old, mother had had a fall and although not serious she needed to travel to see her immediately after the session. I asked her what she felt she needed at that moment in time. As you can see in this photograph she chose to lie down on the floor where the sun was

streaming in. From the placement of her hands I was drawn to her enteric nervous system and finding this place within myself we traced it together. My journal describes the start of this tracing as,

‘My mouth felt sticky and dry.... drier towards my throat and its inviting blackness. I was descending into the unknown...like a white feather I was falling...gently, softly’.

In her book *Sensing, Feeling and Action* Bainbridge-Cohen feels ‘the enteric nervous system determines, if you are feeling safe or unsafe’ (2008: 180). This feeling of safety is required to access our parasympathetic nervous system an important resource in SME especially the ‘felt and lived experience of breathing’ (Williams 2009: 36). It was not until the end of the enteric nervous system tracing that Pauline’s hands settled on her belly and she experienced a strong flow of breath there.

Bookends:



Whereas this top image started our four sessions the bottom one finished them.; they feel a little like the bookends of our co-creation journey. During the final deepening emergence phase her exploration brought her down to the earth and in her words,

‘my journey had become slower until I had marked a place with leaves where I felt safe to lie down. I usually move quite quickly because when I move slowly my movement does not feel fluid, but jerky and jarring. However, today the slow movement just emerged and felt easy

and comfortable. Lying in stillness brought back a memory of a warm April day with the sun on my back lying with my dog, snuggled up close and it brought back so much pleasure, that it felt like heaven on earth. I did not want it to end'.

During this last session with Pauline the leaves, twigs and branches offered a valuable transition from the middle two sessions which had been in a local wood. Pauline had been reluctant to return to the studio as there was a sense of exposure there, a large open space compared to the enclosed feeling amid the trees.

The Outdoor Sessions:



With the two outdoor sessions I was exploring a synthesis between my Walk of Life environmental movement training with Helen Poynor and the progressive facilitation structure offered on this MA in Dance and Somatic Wellbeing. Poynor offers scores to work from in the environment; for example, start at the cliff, take time to arrive there and when you feel ready journey to the water's edge. A time-frame of one or one and a half hours may be given. This is followed by reflective drawing and/or writing and then a speaking circle. Importance is given to each person's individual relationship with the environment and so I wanted to honour this, but at the same time introduce the dyad relationship.

Here in the Somatic Awareness phase Pauline and I connected to our experience of body and the environment by bringing awareness to our breath and periodically moving between the

bodily surfaces of front, side and back. Phase two Waking Up Soma we were awoken to our bodies in relationship to space, time and listening to the varying qualities and dynamics of our bodily experience. The environment offered us spontaneous play with the leaves throwing them over each other as well as bringing us in more sustained body contact. I ended reflective writing of this experience saying

'like girl-goddesses we were washing ourselves in the losses of trees'

When I became aware that Pauline had found a thread which she wanted to follow I moved to a nearby tree to witness. This had a sense of the Deepening Emergence phase and here as well as tracking my bodily sensations my imagination was awoken in session two to Pauline trying to step through a leaf curtain but not being able to. While in session three it appeared like she was conducting the trees with her branch batons. Pauline as an environmental artist chose to make with what was around her for phase four Digestion/ Reflection/ Integration. Speaking of this phase in session two she said

'I was drawn to gather small leaves and sat with them. Then with the surrounding pine needles I started to thread them together in pairs. There was a feeling of joining together, me and another person... me and a tree; a special union. I laid them out on my silver mat; the delicateness of their union was illuminated by the sun'.

Hayes in her book *Performing the Dreams of Your Body: Plays of Animation and Compassion* talking on the power of connection says that 'to connect deeply with other people and with nature [...] brings nourishment, it lightens the heart' (2007: 15). The wood environment was providing a wonderfully rich resource for SME and is something I would like to explore further.

In the reflective phase of session three Pauline built a dwelling, a safe place to go deepening the theme of safety and rest throughout the co-creation journey. This dwelling reminded me

of a place in another wood I used to visit many years ago. A few days later I took some time to revisit and rest there. I had a sense that I was a bear in a cave during its hibernation period. It awakens in me a desire for a period of incubation, an extended period of digestion to process my MA Dance and Somatic Wellbeing journey.



SESSIONS with Sheila Skinner:

Deep rest was important to Sheila. These co-creation sessions along with the weekly group SME sessions she attends, she felt validated her need for stillness and the acceptance of her bodily changes and have become a very important part of her life. Four years ago, her spinal cord became inflamed and she was diagnosed with Neuromyelitis Optica leaving her with paralysis from the waist downwards on the right-hand side. This change in life circumstances has made her slow down and appreciate the beauty in nature around her which she had not previously noticed. Rather than being over-busy, worried and stressed all the time she felt she was learning to find relaxation and contentment. Tufnell in *Beyond Our Words* suggests ‘[i]llness is often an attempt to open and restore connection to something lost within us – a call to reawaken to the needs within us – for companionship, for play, for rest, time for ourselves, for laughter’ (2000: 12).

Within each session she became deliciously aware of her breath responding afterwards with comments such as

'I feel comfortable and relaxed.'

'I feel at peace.'

'I love just being with my breath.'

Awareness of her breathing not only gave Sheila these relaxing feelings, but she had an experience to feel herself in simple effortless movement that connected her inner and outer worlds through the 'tides of *her* breath' (ibid: 9).

Pause: Bring your hands to your lower ribcage and tune into your flow of breath.



With her newfound appreciation of nature during session three Sheila was drawn to some of the oak leaves, twigs and branches in the studio. We played and moved with them until Sheila found her own thread and I became witness to hands caressing leaves and a covering of pelvis. Sheila said of her experience

'my eyes were closed, and I was tuned into the different leaf textures some drier than others'.



After her reflective drawing she explained,

'I especially loved the colour yellow in the leaves, so I chose yellow paper. I now feel part of life. I feel alive'.

Touch and Re-awoken Sensations and Memory:



Collinson in *Re-sourcing the Body: Embodied presence and self-care in working with others* notes that 'new experiences coming into the body can build new neurological pathways, new kinaesthetic experience' (2015: 236). During the second co-creation session after intentional touch to the right foot, Sheila became aware that before this touch her foot was all hunched up and felt like a club. However, now it felt wonderful and that she had not felt the breath of her foot like that before. In the reflective phase she chose to massage her feet with some maples leaves which evoked a memory of playing in the leaves as a child.



Nevertheless, Sheila is on large doses of medication, experiences severe pain and often arrives at sessions with a weighted and deadened feeling in her right hip and leg, claiming that it feels as heavy as lead. Prior to these co-creation sessions she had been away from weekly group sessions for 8 weeks after sustaining a minor fall which had fractured her upper right femur bone, where it comes into the hip socket. For her recuperation she had been advised not to bear any weight for 6 weeks and in weeks 7 and 8 to start standing and taking a few steps. This sudden move to bearing full bodyweight had brought about considerable pain and discomfort.



During the spontaneous movement which emerged out of our touch work Sheila found herself rolling, being able to push with her feet and find integration through the skeletal-muscular system which allowed her to lever onto hands and knees and travel from here; providing a more gradual experience of weight-bearing. I was witness to movements that is described in Bainbridge-Cohen's work as Human Movement Development. While Emilie Conrad's book *Life on Land* informs that such movement is 'grounded in the notion that we are all bio-morphic beings – we include and retain cellular and skeletal-muscle memory of all life forms within our body' (2007: 18). From my sessions with Sheila and embarking on further exploration and research, I feel drawn to working with fall clinics to support fall prevention and recovery.

In a period of personal response after session two I found myself arranging leaves by colour in a circular formation. I had a strong sense of connection and union, of inner and outer. The shadows awoke me to the dark depth beneath the surface of the fire flames of reds and yellows. I felt the possibility of how something that at first may appear dead can burst forth into rays of life. It became a metaphor for my client co-creation sessions and how a heart-felt connection between the SME practitioner and client can bring about a trust and openness whereby the client through their personal journey of self-discovery can find new bodily sensations, motivation and a joy of living.



Pause: Engage in some movement that closes you down and opens you up. Let that settle.

I would like to thank Sheila, Pauline and John for the journeys we have travelled together and yourselves for receiving these journeys.

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