

Hypothesis and Theory

Learning to embody: The Feldenkrais Method®

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Abstract

The Feldenkrais Method introduces a revisited understanding of what *body inscription* can do in the fields of learning, re-learning, and remediation of capacities, in particular by stimulating the plasticity of the nervous system and by promoting the training and reactivation of our perfectibility. The Feldenkrais Method can help to clarify or reconsider what *corporeality* can do in this project of possible and continued learning.

How can the Feldenkrais Method support such a purpose of quality and accuracy in our action by the means of a learning process that involves, and often is based on, a person's ability to move? What does this tell us about the way human beings develop and learn?

This contribution seeks to highlight modalities at work in the Feldenkrais Method, described as a process that favors precise, adapted action, or allows the freedom necessary for the realization of any human project, with in particular emphasis on the learning component of our projects.

Keywords

corporeality, experiential process, presence, Feldenkrais Method, Feldenkrais' perspectives, nervous system, skills development, learning

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This text was written, following the formal constraint of a contribution, for the International Colloquium: *Awareness in the teaching situation: Body, gestures, speech*.¹

My purpose was to present to teacher-researchers, mainly lecturers and university professors in pedagogy, certain aspects of the Feldenkrais Method from my experience of teaching the Method. Insisting on the modalities of embodiment in the teaching function of this discipline, I attempted to describe some of the principles of the Method, its purpose and to evoke some applications.

The thesis that I have defended: that the Feldenkrais Method introduces a revisited understanding of what *body inscription*² can do in the fields of learning, re-learning and remediation of capacities, in particular by stimulating the plasticity of the nervous system and by promoting the training and reactivation of our *perfectibility*.³

The teaching of the Feldenkrais Method is a discipline that is rooted in the possibilities that our corporeality offers us. We are embodied beings and it is this that we must relearn as our primary agent of communication with the environment. Our speech must also become the expression of our relationship with the world and it is as a whole that we are interacting with others. It is the incarnation of our experience that gives substance, that is to say consistency, to what we can transmit to others, it is our very experience as an incarnated being that makes our experience operative.⁴ The Feldenkrais Method practitioner, in order to teach what he has planned, must

¹ *Prise de conscience dans la situation d'enseignement: Corps, gestes, parole*, Conference directors : Bernard Andrieu and Emmanuelle Maitre de Pembroke, at the University of Créteil, May 25 and 26, 2016, LIRTES / IMAGINER / TEC. Some additions have been made to the original French version.

² *Corporeal inscription : Inscription, inscribed*, similar to the usage, for example, in geometry, "the incircle or inscribed circle of a triangle", etc. Also like a sign lets *in* a surface, *in* a medium – like inscribing signs on a clay table, or engraving figures on stone or wood, or in any other support. See: Varela Thompson and Rosch, 1993.

³ *Perfectibility*: the capacity to change and improve in response to inadequacy, which can also incorporate *evolvability*: the ability to adapt to new situations.

⁴ *Productive* as in the title, *Productive Thinking* (1945) by Gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer, mentioned by Moshe Feldenkrais as an important text during the San Francisco Feldenkrais Training in 1975. See also: Feldenkrais, 1977: *The Case of Nora*. *Productive* as an operation, as an underlying process, for example in a calculation or in the way one lends one's experience to a formula in order for it to have meaning. For example, the cogito, "I think, I am", requires that one operates the experience itself so that the words and the significance acquire a *meaning*. So this idea of *operative, productive* involves

draw on his own experience – which involves variations other than his own – and in particular the experience he has developed of kinesthetics. It is from there that he starts to help another person, mainly through touch in Functional Integration®, or to a group of people, through speech in Awareness Through Movement®, to continue the examination through movement of each person's own way of organizing their movement, of the commitment of this specific way and to encounter possibilities of doing it differently.

The Feldenkrais Method has its foundations in this sensorimotor dimension, and its informative and organizing capacities of the *learning circuits*.⁵ We can therefore also say: the Feldenkrais Method is a pedagogy that takes as its source the capacities of each individual to feel and to move. This pedagogy uses movement and the articulation of movement as the medium of learning and the principle of the development of the individual. In our development in general, an intention is enough to provide a complicated series of impulses that preside over or program all our movements. The Feldenkrais Method uses this functioning to help individuals connect (or match) their thoughts and sensations, their feelings, and with their actions and reactions.

Most often we have forgotten that during our development we had to learn all sorts of things and go through many stages, that we had to develop abilities that were not given to us. To do this, two factors came into play: our own organization and the interaction of the environment (Merleau-Ponty 1961: ch. 2). We have deepened our species-related learning within the animal kingdom, but because the human central nervous system (CNS) is so complex, it has allowed us to do very high-level and strictly individual (ontogenetic) learning.

The Feldenkrais Method is a way to promote learning of any kind by stimulating the processes coextensive with our psychomotor development, using the scripts at play in neurological development. The purpose of the Feldenkrais Method, through simple movements, repeated gently, according to a slow rhythm and taking as a reference the motor development in children, is to stimulate our Central Nervous System (CNS), whatever our age, by exploiting and awakening its plasticity and to refine the quality of sensory information. Inscripting specific pathways at the level of synaptic networks makes a variation of movement possible; organizing discriminations between similar but slightly different movements will constitute the differentiation necessary for a specific movement (and other factors such as the intervention of inhibition processes, or disinhibitions, depending on the circumstances). The synaptic circuits are set up little by little and become more complex according to the actions that solicit them. Thus, the more the destinations are differentiated, the more possible variations the person will have at his disposal and the more he will be able to incarnate his singularity. It is in the repetition of an

an insight-based processing. Many thinkers defend the process by which only insightful *reasoning* could bring true understanding of conceptual problems and relationships. Productive thinking is characterized by shifts in perspective which allow the person *solving* to consider new, sometimes transformational, approaches.

⁵ The term *learning circuit* emphasizes a process that requires not only the capabilities of the nervous system but also other factors and dimensions of learning, that are not strictly electrical, chemical, or mechanical but the manifestation of a wider complex system.

action, of a movement that the child learns little by little to forge an experience and that his movement adjusts to his intention, the purpose of his action.

The Feldenkrais Method approach emphasizes the way in which a movement is performed. In short, it uses processes of differentiation, asymmetrical explorations, and trains the capacities of sensorimotor imagination or simulation of movements (Feldenkrais 1997). The Method aims to clarify our body schema or self-image (Schilder 1968) and to encourage or allow potentials buried under habits to emerge or dysfunctions to be attenuated or even erased in favor of a more functional and better inhabited organization (Feldenkrais 1997). In the case of severe dysfunctions, the Feldenkrais Method seeks to solicit relearning processes that can reorganize the functions at the level of the nervous system. There is a continuous interaction between motor and sensory activities. Sometimes, and even often, an inability to move a limb is linked not only to a motor deficit but also to a sensory disorder and it is here that the Feldenkrais Method manages to put in place efficient remediations, even at the level of self-image and sense of self.

Consider a case: a person has a problem putting on his shoes congruently. For a Feldenkrais Method practitioner, the important thing is to remedy this disorganization, and the determination that it is due to mental confusion or apraxia does not help to understand or practically solve the dysfunction. We can make the hypothesis that it is the evidence of choosing the shoe for the corresponding foot that is blurred or disintegrated; we wonder if this difficulty is accompanied by other disturbances. In this person's case, we know that he has an orientation disorder. Several factors – such as redrawing by touch the shape of the feet (with the big toes towards the median line of the body and being able to meet each other towards the interior; with the two small toes towards the exterior, etc.); the study of the passage and the trajectory of the impulses from the underside of the foot through the skeletal structure ; and different movements that enrich the image (Gestalt) – completing an adequate perception and a functional synthesis, helped this person to regain the ability, without having to think about it, to determine which shoe fits which foot. This kinesthetic learning can then give way to spontaneous functioning. We have reintegrated function through representation in a sensory and motor mode, and in so doing, we have stimulated the corresponding connections in the neurological system or help to 'wire' it in a more functional way. This redefinition of his feet allowed his system, globally organized, to adopt an action adapted to his project: to put on his shoes in order to have the best balance once he had shoes on.⁶

We could just as easily have proceeded by guiding him through words and by proposing different explorations through movement. In any case, it seems crucial to us, in these explorations, in this learning or re-learning, that the person starts from himself, from his actuality,

⁶ "Putting proper shoe on proper foot", similar cases can also be found in Feldenkrais' studies and works: *The Case of Nora* (1977), a women recovering from a stroke (2nd ed., 1993, 12); and individual lesson given, June 28, 1980, by Feldenkrais at the Amherst Feldenkrais Training Program: Larry #1, a man that had had several heart attacks.

and not from an external and abstract model or a theoretically-applied model without any link with his own experience.

I could have chosen many other experiences and each time I would have emphasized that the Feldenkrais Method works in many ways. It is not a miracle method, nor is it a set of devices to be applied, rather it is a pedagogy of experiential research focused on better functionality, which often requires time and perseverance.

In this man's case, reconnecting through touch the sensation of the foot, its shape, its extent, its articulations, that is to say also its motor possibilities in relation to the whole leg, its symmetrical relation to the other leg, its relation to the whole, etc. allowed him to restore his ability to choose the correct shoe for the corresponding foot. Other elements put us on the path of this hypothesis of a disturbed body schema, but other observations could have led us to consider another necessary track to clarify or reorganize his movements. It is very likely that the restoration of the foot in the organization of the whole also affected other disorganizations: either that it made it possible to bring them to light, or that it indirectly reabsorbed them, or reduced them.

The functional development is not only an epiphenomenon in the capacities of learning in general. Often, the discoveries that individuals make with regard to their motor capacities remove unnoticed inhibitions that were disturbing other kinds of learning.

If, from our body and its sensorimotor connections, we can develop skills that apparently have nothing to do with them (this complex system of a sensitive body capable of movement), it is from the fact that our motor abilities are the most direct expression of our degree of maturation and the most accessible manifestation of the processes of organization, adjustment, and self-regulation put forward by the works on neuroplasticity (Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 1993; Reese 2015: 307-309; Buzsáki 2019).

The loss of this 'image of a part of the self' can cause countless other disturbances and take the form of other demonstrations. There are unnoticed secondary benefits in restoring or complementing the body schema; thus the person can regain a greater inner calm and consequently also a greater availability for other things, a form, for example, of freedom of mind.

If, as we defend, our corporeality is what without which we would not have a world, it is essential and urgent to reconnect with our own sensations of embodied beings (Merleau-Ponty 1964). As long as the experience is not lived,⁷ it (this experiential process) can remain empty and sound empty. This is why I insist on the fact that my presentation has no demonstrative pretension but only provides an introductory aim to encourage people to practice this Method and to confront

⁷ *Lived experience*: I mean any manifestation that generates changes in our perception, in our thinking, in our way of relating to anything, whether it is other people, other situations, other ways of thinking and being able to understand them, and or that integrates or incorporates itself into our modes of action, as opposed to a strict theoretical idea without any connection or reference to the sensory level or implication for our incarnation.

themselves with this type of learning of their own functional patterns. The training, by this Method, to shift, for example, attention from the foreground to the background, and then to navigate from one to the other, *allows us*, little by little, to pay attention distinctly, and yet simultaneously, to both at the same time. And this new disposition, or skill, makes it possible to widen our field of presence, and to develop the perception of oneself in volume; this three-dimensional embodiment can, in its turn, contribute to the recognition of the proper field of others, for instance. From there, other developments can also be enabled (or supported).

In the Feldenkrais Method, one practices a precise and oriented flow of attention. However, the Feldenkrais Method does not advocate an intellectualization of our actions; the idea on the contrary, is to let the spontaneous emerge in a more and more relevant and acute presence (Ménasé 2003). The benefit is to embody a higher functionality in action, and not to develop a greater self-observation in intention⁸ which, in the face of an audience, would lead to an unfortunate splitting between the purpose itself (to develop a high quality of presence) and the way of not performing it actually. However, in order to develop this kind of presence-awareness (developed for example through the practice of the Feldenkrais Method), one must first have spent a certain amount of time with oneself observing oneself in action, i.e. in movement. As Moshe Feldenkrais comments, "The most talented individuals improve by becoming aware of themselves in action, and their talent is born from the freedom they derive from this, to choose between different modes of action" (Feldenkrais 1997: 121).

The ambition of this Method is to find ways for each individual to find what is unique in him or herself and thus make an essential contribution, not only to him or herself, but to society. For this, it is necessary that teaching be understood as an embodied method of knowledge and experience.

⁸ In French, I have contrasted *en action* with *en intention*, to emphasize that it is not an empty will, nor a formal or ideal tendency.

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Biography

Initially a researcher in philosophy and editor of several of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's manuscripts and numerous articles relating to the ontology unfolded in his latest work, Stéphanie is the author of a book *Passivité et Création [Passivity and Creation]*, exposing how our activities are doubled with passivity and showing the consequences of such an understanding on subjectivity, on freedom and on what can be a creative action. Prior to her training in the Feldenkrais Method (in 2009), her field of study has been the work and legacy of Moshe Feldenkrais, notably through the vast repertoire of his lessons, both in their practical dimension and in their underlying scientific and cognitive presuppositions and contributions. She has participated in the publication of materials as well as in the reorganization of the Zotero database of Feldenkrais references (IFF Research Working Group). She continues to practice for herself and has a sustained practice (in French and English) in various contexts. As a painter, she regularly participates in individual and group exhibitions.