

Article

## **The Experience of Being Embodied: Qualitative Research And Somatic Education - A Perspective Based On The Feldenkrais Method®**

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### **Abstract**

Somatic Education is the name of a new disciplinary field which focuses on the living body, on the biological basis of consciousness and awareness, and on movement as experienced in space. The Feldenkrais Method and all other methods for somatic education share the need for qualitative research: to formulate their theories and define the scientific basis of their concepts; to measure the effects of their practices; to understand and improve the training process for practitioners and teachers. The paradoxical nature of verbally conducted research dealing with a non-verbal research object such as the body also needs to be clarified. Any researcher concerned with the quality of somatic education must bring to the research process an awareness of her/his own body. This is both a characteristic feature and an undeniable necessity for such research.

### **Keywords**

Somatic Education, Feldenkrais, consciousness, awareness, qualitative research

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**First published:** *Revue de l'Association pour la recherche qualitative* (1995), Vol. 12, pp. 87-99.

**Please cite:** *Feldenkrais Research Journal*, volume 1; 2004.

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## ***THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING EMBODIED***

### **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND SOMATIC EDUCATION**

#### **A PERSPECTIVE BASED ON THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD®**

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#### **INTRODUCTION – A Personal Point of View**

The perspective I would like to present here springs from my experience as practitioner, instructor, and researcher in the sphere of somatic education, and more particularly as a Feldenkrais® (note 1) or “Awareness Through Movement” teacher. I would like to share some ideas, relate certain “adventures”, and above all outline a few questions which have been uppermost in my mind during more than twenty years of researching issues of special interest in the context of my practical work – and specifically in the field of somatic education. Please note that this introduction does not aim at being strictly academic in either style or pretension. If “the body has its reasons”, body-centred work and a practitioner’s reflections about the practices constituting such work also have their proper reasons.

My thanks go to the **Association for Qualitative Research** and the committee charged with organising the congress on “*Le corps de la recherche*” (“*Research into Embodiment*”) for letting me represent the perspective of professional somatic educators. This theme offers an excellent opportunity for building bridges between the worlds of university and professional practice, and especially between researchers, practitioners, and those who are involved in researching issues arising within the context of actual practice.

In the following sections I will deal with four points:

- A- The sphere of somatic education and the Feldenkrais Method
- B- Relevant research requirements in that field
- C- The limitations of verbally conducted research into the experience of “being embodied”
- D- Research into embodiment and the researcher’s body

I will try to show that the methods of somatic education offer a vast range of possibilities for anyone interested in qualitative research. This field itself is in need of research and a coherent language. The somatic process needs to be properly spelled out. Finally, somatic practitioners and educators need to come up with an appropriate language which matches the somatic experience. That task in itself constitutes an interesting paradox and exceptional research challenge since somatic experience essentially defies verbal description. In addition, the methods of somatic education offer qualitative research a unique opportunity for immersion in the phenomenological experience of being alive in a body – i.e. a concrete setting for researching embodiment where the body of the researcher is also taken into account. *“Non-reductionist researchers in the cognitive sciences see conscience and experience as irreducibly real phenomena. We therefore need to equip ourselves with a method for exploring these phenomena.”* (Varela 1993a: 54) In his book *The Embodied Mind* Varela turns to Buddhism and meditation in order to underpin his research into *enactment* and the phenomenology of mind. I myself believe that somatic education offers research a wide range of methods for exploring the phenomenology of the body and should therefore occupy an important place in qualitative research – in terms of realisation of actual projects and also in education and training. I hope that what I have said so far will facilitate exchanges between the fields of qualitative research and somatic education.

## A- THE DOMAIN OF SOMATIC EDUCATION

### with special reference to THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD

Somatic education is in process of emerging as a new discipline. It could be defined as: **the disciplinary field embracing a variety of methods concerned with learning processes whereby the sensitive body (the ‘soma’) acquires awareness through movement within its environment.**

This discipline is interested in the living body’s subjectively experienced capacity for self-education. The field it covers lies at the intersection of arts and sciences focusing on the living body, and is of relevance for many different spheres: health care (rehabilitation, psychology, physical activity), sports performance (training and competitive achievements), the creative arts (interpretation and creation), philosophy (embodiment of mind, “constructivism”), education and teaching in general (concrete physical and experiential foundations of learning); and also more specialized fields such as phenomenology, bio-mechanics, meditation, biology and “systemics”, cognitive sciences, and movement sciences. This

impressive list of tangentially related disciplines well demonstrates the complexity of this newly emerging domain - without even mentioning the thirty or so specific methods embraced by practitioners all over the Western world in the name of somatic education (note 2). “Beyond their special features the different methods share a fundamentally similar aim: learning to refine one’s kinaesthetic and proprioceptive sense in order to act with greater efficiency, pleasure, and power of expression, - but also with less pain” (Quebec Association for Somatic Education, 1994).

In the expression “somatic education” the word *soma* is of special importance. Its intended meaning differs from current usage, opposing *somatic* and *psychological*. Here we are in fact rehabilitating the concept of *soma* implied by the Greek word which since the time of Hesiod has stood for “*the living body*”. Hence what we are thinking of is the body in its totality, i.e. subjectively experienced as an integral part of its environment. The recent trend of articulating and valuing the experience of being thus embodied goes back to Thomas Hanna, the founder of the American magazine *Somatics* (note 3). He suggested the following definition of *somatics*: “*the art and science of the interrelational process between awareness, biological function, and the environment*” (Hanna, 1989: 1). Apart from Hanna several other authors and researchers took an interest in the body experienced as a living entity (note 4), in *embodiment* (Varela, 1993a, 1993b, 1994), in the self-regulation of living systems (Maturana and Varela, 1990), and in the anatomy of consciousness (Rosenfield, 1992, 1993).

The vast field of somatics includes practices of oriental origin, biofeedback, mental imagery, Reichian approaches, psycho-neuro-immunology, and everything related to the body-mind. A well-defined sub-division of that field consists of methods whose common perspective is somatic education (Johnson, 1995).

Somatic education distinguishes itself from the majority of psychophysical approaches which bring to light repressed emotions and unfinished relationships by way of the body. Such approaches could be called “somatic psychology” (Johnson 1997) or “soma-therapy” as indicated by the title of a French journal. Does not the word *therapy* etymologically signify the treatment of dysfunction and illness? However, the art and science of somatic educators does not focus on pathology and symptoms, aetiology and healing, but rather on the sensory-motor learning process, the development of kinaesthetic potential, and the discovery of better strategic options in movement (Joly, 1994:14).

Let's take a concrete example and talk a little about **the Feldenkrais Method** which I have been practicing and teaching for more than twenty years. This method was created by Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984), a physicist and engineer who once worked at the Joliot-Curie laboratory for nuclear physics. Feldenkrais was also a judo expert and first European black belt, and a follower of Gurdjieff's teachings. His method offers improved awareness of the living body as it moves within the gravitational field. Feldenkrais was interested in human movement and its role in the development of our skills and the implementation of our actions. This method is practiced both within a group and individually, i.e. under the verbal or manual direction of a teacher. This teacher will have undergone extensive training aimed at acquiring "objective" knowledge of the moving body, as perceived in *third person mode* (anatomy of movement, physiology, biomechanics, bodily functions). At the same time, if not primarily, such a teacher will have submitted to a rigorous process of subjective movement exploration as experienced in *first person mode*. This rehabilitation of educated subjectivity in professional practice constitutes the unique characteristic of somatic education as a discipline. In order to gain professional competence the teacher-practitioner has to rely on her or his own experience or personal understanding and knowledge, acquired through actual *experimentation*. In this respect each of the main methods of somatic education employs its own educational strategies for training future teachers. But let's look at a concrete example by providing you with an experience here and now.

### **First EXPERIENTIAL PROPOSAL**

**Stay as you are right now, sitting or reclining, and pay attention to your position and the sensations you are experiencing in your body at this moment. You can close your eyes or keep them open as you please. You'll find that one of these two possibilities will make the exploration easier. Direct attention to your breathing and observe the rhythm. How much time is taken up by breathing in, breathing out, and the pauses in between?**

**Where does the respiration make itself felt in your trunk?**

**Now let your attention go to the parts of yourself that contact the floor and the seat (maybe also the back) of the chair.**

**Notice if these areas of contact and support are similar on the left and right side of yourself.**

**Notice if the head seems to be inclined, vertical, or turned.**

**Don't change anything of what you are observing. You may actually find it difficult to sense something without moving immediately.**

To continue the concrete description of a somatic educator's daily work, I can say that during a single week I may encounter the following people in my private practice: a child suffering from cerebral palsy, a construction worker recovering from back injury, a singer in search of vocal flexibility, a musician suffering from chronic pain when he plays the violin, a painter whose creative inspiration has hit rock-bottom, a professional golfer looking for a teaching method that might help beginners to learn with greater ease, a teacher suffering from anxiety and burn-out, a "full-time" mother who is trying to reorient herself after her children have left home, a dancer who finds his technical training too exhausting, a dyslexic child, or even a horse with behaviour problems whenever it has to get into a horse-box for transportation. What all these client-pupils have in common are certainly not symptoms! All these people encounter themselves in somatic education because of the approach, which allows self-experience as an embodied being and self-awareness in and through movement.

The practice of somatic education relies on the practitioner's capacity to sense her/his own self in movement; and also on the ability to perceive - by way of observation, touch, and imaginative projection - what is going on in the other person's subjective experience. It is as if one could tune one's own inner experience into that of another living system and on that basis set in motion an educational process by employing the particular strategies which characterize each method. A major part of this educational work relies therefore on the practitioner's intuitive capacity. By that I mean the capacity to think without words in that pre-verbal universe of the sensory-motor realm, in the intimate awareness of embodied life. This makes the approach what it is. This also causes all the difficulties both in the practice as such and in the training of future practitioners. And what about the difficulty of doing research in that universe beyond the reach of words? And isn't it paradoxical to be speaking about all that now?

## **B- The Practice of Somatic Education and Requirements for Appropriate Research**

In somatic education, as in any new discipline, there is a great need of appropriate research. I am going to highlight a number of requirements, not necessarily in order of priority.

- 1- Somatic education needs to define itself as a discipline, spell out what it involves. Its theoretical models are still relatively little developed. Its language lacks precision and practitioners of various allegiances are using the same words. Anyone who reads a little

about this field will quickly realize that their vocabulary is nearly interchangeable, while they employ very different strategies in their practical, concrete, educational work. Hence the first great requirement is to clarify language, concepts, methods, and theoretical framework. A research project should be mentioned in this connection. In her doctoral thesis Odette Guimond (1987) presents important analysis of the meaning and crucial role played by movement in theatre performance and the training of actors, but also more generally in somatic education. Such research helps enormously to stimulate conceptualisation.

Undoubtedly, behind the linguistic frameworks (“*linguaging*”) in which each such method is couched, there resides a hidden substratum common to them all, constituting the domain to be defined. Furthermore, anyone who is familiar with more than one of them is aware of enormous differences between the various methods - both in terms of theory and concrete educational practice.

“One will be more directive, or rather corrective, another more exploratory; one will put the emphasis on the use of space, another on interiorisation of movement; one will prefer movement on the floor, another in the vertical. Different somatic educators will be more or less interested in language, imagination, interaction among the participants, communication by touch, emotional or artistic expression” (Joly, 1994:12).

In terms of set theory one could say: what is common to this great variety of methods will define the discipline of somatic education as such. However, the features characteristic of each method on the conceptual and educational level have still to be made explicit; and in that respect research is still in its infancy. Rigorous research is crucial in order to establish the boundaries and appropriate signposts for this disciplinary field.

2- Effectiveness of somatic education still has to be underpinned by rigorous, I was going to say *scientific*, research, provided that subjective real-life experience is included in the researcher’s idea of science. Of course one could apply traditional double-blind procedures to measure the effectiveness of an intervention in somatic education; for instance among patients suffering from multiple sclerosis or athletes willing to submit themselves to a variety of interventions, randomly assigning subjects to experimental or control group and also taking into account the placebo effect. Such research could be

pertinent; and when all methodological and ethical difficulties have been overcome, certain objectifying and quantifying projects of this type would undoubtedly be useful, if not absolutely necessary, so as to assure the credibility of the discipline – at least in certain circles. However, and for all sorts of reasons, this type of research has never been very popular in the somatic domain. My personal experience and initial training in scientific methodology could have taken me in that direction, but I have resisted such research mainly because the research methods don't seem to derive from the same source as the process which they intend to examine. It took me years to get in touch with my own sense of being really alive in my body and give this sense its due in my personal practice and existence. So all purely objectifying and quantifying research became something I wished to resist because it simply does not do justice to the importance of the process under investigation. Can the effectiveness of the process in somatic education be evaluated as such? In other words can it be measured by way of external, objectifying criteria, without taking into account the specifics of the particular methods being used? Undoubtedly it can, but that is not the only way. We simply need to recognize that any intervention involving another person is unique. Somatic education or method F, A, B, or C does not function for “multiple sclerosis” or “back pain”, but for individual people, and it “works” more or less regardless of the symptoms presented. The most important factor in efficient intervention is the communication established between practitioner and pupil. This at least is what the practitioner believes, because s/he is unlikely to use the same strategies for people with the same symptoms. What would therefore be the point of evaluating a method of treating an illness or improving a sportsman's performance when the mediating factors are left out of account? Although I am not familiar with the entire realm of methodology, I ask myself if one should not simply recognize that qualitative – and more specifically phenomenological - methods are better able to shed light on the domain of somatic education, including assessment of its effectiveness. Research projects such as the one undertaken by Sylvie Fortin (1994) at the University of Quebec dance department exemplify how qualitative methods can be applied to the study of somatic education and its impact within a particular discipline, in this case dance.

- 3- The “real life experience” of those actively involved in the process of somatic education is an area that has scarcely been studied and documented. A few pioneers, such as Charlotte Beaudoin (1994) of the department of physical education at the university of Laval, are interested in this aspect. Obviously, that type of phenomenological research is



extremely relevant to everybody in this field and very rich for those who accompany students' professional development. In addition, participation in such a research project must enrich the experience of anybody involved in discussing what is at issue. However, that kind of research presents a major methodological challenge, consisting in having to explain in words what is somatically experienced during a course of action.

Doesn't the value of this type of research mainly depend on the subjects' capacity to verbalize their experience? This question will be taken up later since it crops up in connection with both study of process and procedure, and also research into other aspects. I believe that the relationship between lived experience and language lies at the very centre of what needs to be clarified in somatic education.

4- The verbal and especially the non-verbal communication process unfolding between two people during a somatic education session might strike an uninitiated observer as quite mysterious and give rise to questions such as: What impels the practitioner to say this or that, touch here or there, make a pause, start again, and finally stop? Students in training programmes are always curious to know what their teachers are thinking of when they give a demonstration. What objective do they have in mind, what principles guide the teachers' actions? The answers to all these questions are part of a complex cognitive process, which belongs essentially to the immediacy of direct experience in the present moment, but is ultimately supported by past experience. The practitioner may see images, hear words, feel some sensation or emotion, receive inspiration from an idea, direct attention to her/his own comfort or sensations. - By the way, how does the practitioner know that the source of those sensations lies either within the self or in the interaction with the other because they originate in the other person? - An important breakthrough in research into this kind of question was made in Quebec by Yves St Arnaud at the psychology department of Sherbrooke University and Yvan Joly of the Feldenkrais Institute for Somatic Education in Montreal (St Arnaud, 1993, St Arnaud et Joly, 1992). Aiming at developing appropriate concepts for somatic practice, they applied a methodological model inspired by "action-science". Sufficiently general in scope and therefore not restricted to somatic practices, this model essentially consists of an exchange based on a questionnaire which was drawn up with a specific idea of practice in mind. This questionnaire also offered an opportunity to review video-recorded interventions which the practitioner is then asked to explain, make explicit, and describe, in terms of what s/he subjectively experienced during the professional moves made during the

session. As a result her/his educational strategies begin to stand out more clearly. These are then reflected back to the practitioner by the researcher who devised the methodological model. The effort of trying to verbalize one's actions and subsequent reflections on this action are enormously stimulating. Since I have myself submitted to such a process I can testify to its value. As a result comprehension of my interventions improved tremendously and my capacity to find adequate words and explain myself to others also made big strides. The influence on my personal practice could be felt during the long months of research. (It is more difficult to maintain that is still the case after several months have passed). My teaching activities in training programmes have greatly benefited as well. In my view, this type of research deserves to be repeated and maybe pursued more methodically for the different practices involved in the domain of somatic education. Of course, here too much remains to be done if research is to include all of somatic experience, i.e. not only what can be put into words. Is there a way of accounting for the entire complexity of the interactive process experienced in somatic education without succumbing to the reductionism of language?

5- The last research requirement I would like to mention relates to training programmes and the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process they offer. Analysis of the training process of future somatic educators itself has hardly begun. However, some schools have already trained several hundred new practitioners. Training models could be more precise, and better validated as well. What kind of competency profile (since this expression is fashionable at present) are we looking for and would ultimately like to come up with? How do we establish the criteria indicating successful completion of the training course? How do the trainers determine whether a student is in a position to practise without supervision? How does the subject acting as a trainer establish an educational rapport with the subject in the role of trainee? What objective factors have to be taken into account in the training programme? How can one evaluate the achievement of objectives on the level of the subjective learning process for which the student him- or herself needs to be responsible? What kind of self-examination is expected of the students? We have to remember that in somatic education one has to be able to touch a person's head and sense what the subject experiences while being touched! The model that all the different schools of somatic education rely on to a certain degree in their training programmes is based on the master-disciple relationship. Is that the most appropriate model? If somatic education as a discipline begins to penetrate into the academic sphere what conditions will the institution have to respect in order to safeguard the subject's living experience at the heart

of the process? How does it become apparent that the students' personal development requires immersion in somatic experience and how is that aspect to be incorporated in curriculum and evaluation?

Several questions about education and training with regard to professional practice have been raised by GRAPP (*Groupe de réflexion et d'action sur les pratiques professionnelles*) (note 5). Between 1987 and 1997 this association brought together in Quebec trainers, practitioners, and teachers from different academic institutions as well as some practitioners and trainers from the private sphere. This group scrutinized the relationship between action and reflection, academic and practical knowledge, theory and practice, and all aspects concerning the training of future practitioners in education, psychology, sociology, counselling, and also in somatic education. After all it has to be realized that somatic education is not only of relevance in connection with the training of professional practitioners. Discussions at GRAPP showed that somatic education could contribute a great deal towards devising exploratory and learning models for all aspects of subjective experience as an integral part of action. At GRAPP we could, for instance, add to reflection about intuition and the workings of non-verbal thought. In turn the influence of our colleagues in university education and training and at more practically oriented levels led to a considerable expansion of our understanding with regard to methods and problems in the relationship between action and reflection. Hence that type of research proved to be very useful for us.

## **C- THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING EMBODIED**

### **THE LIMITS OF VERBALLY CONDUCTED RESEARCH**

Let's now move straight to the heart of what preoccupies me most, namely how we experience ourselves as living bodies and how we speak about that experience. To begin with I would like to remind you with Korzybski (1966:25), the originator of general semantics that:

- 1) The map is not the territory (Words are not the thing they represent).
- 2) A map does not cover the entire territory (Words cannot convey everything they represent).

According to my personal mythology I would say that the sense of being embodied is like the flag on the highest point of an iceberg. The greatest part of the iceberg of consciousness is below the waterline. Then there is the visible part of the iceberg, which – one might say – can be “felt”. On the very top of the iceberg there is a tiny little symbol for communication and identification. What is the relationship between these “levels” of embodied life? I am using

the word “levels” on purpose, implying at the same time that we need to ask about the hierarchy of these levels. The answer from the point of view of somatic education is that the highest, most important level is that of experience, and experience cannot be reduced to what one can say about it.

In my opinion we would get thoroughly trapped if we were now to begin a sophisticated and intellectually demanding discussion about semantics, semiology, and the role of the senses. Don't worry; I have neither competence for, nor any present interest in, such a discussion. I simply want to draw attention to the feeling of unease that frequently crops up when the question of research into the living body is raised. This often leads to endless verbiage and the experience itself gets lost. Of course we use words for certain kinds of communication such as I am involved in here. But how many books, how many articles devoted to the phenomenology of the body and lived experience, consist of a continuous flood of abstractions that have nothing to do with the living experience of the researcher and hardly anything with that of the subject under investigation. Please don't misunderstand me: it is not a matter of dismissing language, and the oral or written symbol, altogether. I too belong to those who sometimes defend, occasionally with brio, the view that “an unspoken experience does not exist”! It is more a matter of making sure that right proportions and links are maintained between the flag on the iceberg and the iceberg itself, including the part submerged under water.

Maybe, however, it is simply a question of revising the use of language? Well, no, that won't do, if you ask me. Of course, after seeing a film one can talk about it in different ways and on different levels. Certain forms of language, certain styles of expression, are more or less detached from what the viewers experienced during the film, or more or less in tune with it. For research in somatic education it would be more appropriate to stay close to the experience, even if one's objective is to elaborate a theory of somatic education. But my intention is to go even further in this debate, since asking one's subjects to speak about their somatic experience already demands a degree of dissociation from them, especially if one asks them to speak during the process of experimentation (“*experienciation*”). Talking about a somatic experience in retrospect means relying on memory and the evocation of the particular experience; in other words the subject no longer talks about what s/he really experienced but about something else.

Allow me to distinguish three aspects of somatic experience and its expression, and to make what I have in mind more concrete by asking you to consider for a few moments how it would be to subject yourself to the following experiential exposition:

### **Second EXPERIENTIAL PROPOSAL**

**Please take a minute or so to make yourself really comfortable on or in your chair.**

**Make any change that you feel necessary.**

**Do this NOW before reading further.**

**GOOD, THANKS. You can read on.**

**Observe what kind of adjustments you made in response to my invitation/ suggestion.**

**If, so far as you know, you didn't make any changes, simply go on reading.**

**How long did it take you to decide what you should change in your posture and relation to the chair; and how much time did the adjustments themselves take?**

**Did you talk to yourself internally before, during, or after changing something?**

**What did you actually change?**

**Could you go back to the starting position, which would obviously have seemed less comfortable to you?**

**Does that position appear different as you re-consider it now?**

**If you did change your position, does that mean that you were not sitting comfortably before?**

**RETURN TO THE SECOND POSITION, IN OTHER WORDS THE ONE YOU CHOSE IN ORDER TO BE MORE COMFORTABLE.**

**Which criteria did you take into account in your decision to change or not to change your position?**

**Were these sensations, interior images, emotions, tastes, smells, tactile or cutaneous perceptions, words you heard or said to yourself, an impression of being tired or tense, or whatever else?**

**If you are more at ease in your present position, what tells you so?**

**Finally, consider for a moment the following two possibilities:**

**either you have already answered all these questions and are now free,**

**or you now have to write down your answers for an interviewer who will soon ring you up in order to carry out his research into somatic education.**

The distinctions I would like to present after this practical experiment will throw light on different modes of experience. First of all let's be clear: From the standpoint of somatic education, the primary objective of this little exploration might have been to discover the concrete notion of comfort in sitting, and through that bring about an improvement of the person's capacity for self-regulation as s/he interacts with her/his environment. This is what the teacher hopes to achieve. We also have to take into account what impact the teacher exerts through his presence, vocal intonation, the pauses s/he makes, the choice of words. Then we have to ask what the pupil experiences and learns; and also what the pupil thinks s/he is experiencing and learning, what he or she is actually conscious of. Finally, there is the question of what the pupil can or wants to say about her or his experience. That is just a brief overview of some of the distinctions we have to make in somatic education as a scientific discipline.

What is important for me in the practice of somatic education as a teacher is that my pupils develop the skill to organize themselves during movement and action. This would include being able to change position regularly in order to maintain the experience of comfort while sitting during a conference or lecture, even, or particularly, if that lecture or conference is as captivating as this one. During this somatic learning process I can give my students a sense of direction by employing an approach of verbally guided discovery such as the one above. More often than not the answers to my questions which the pupils come up with benefit only themselves, without being communicated to the teacher. I could also guide my pupil's somatic learning process with my hands, i.e. through touch, sensing the nature of the pupil's experience of comfort by way of an extension of what I myself experience, and directing her or his somatic exploration and learning through touching the person with my hands. In both cases there is no need for the pupil's verbal expression; in fact it often cuts the pupil off from her/his sensations, especially in moments of intensely novel and complex discovery. In some cases I might myself disconnect my discourse from what the pupils are somatically experiencing at that moment (by talking about the weather or the most recent game in my favourite sport). In this instance it is as if I took charge of verbalising a certain dissociated level in order to allow the pupil to associate more successfully on a somatic level. Of course both the pupil and myself could also confirm a particular somatic experience by some comment, indeed amplify such an experience by talking about it. But to repeat once again, most of the time such verbalisation is not essential to the process of somatic learning. And

here we are back with the question with which we started: what about research into the process that is taking place during somatic education?

#### **D- Research into embodiment and the researcher's body**

Before readers get the impression that they have been taken on a voyage towards squaring a circle, let me describe in the following paragraphs what the nature of the relation between “somatic life and language” might be. In fact I believe that we need to develop research methods which include the researcher's consciousness in their methodology.

In the 70's a number of research workers yielded to the incontestable need for *consciousness-dependent research* (scientific studies that take the researcher's state of consciousness into account). This proved to be necessary, for instance, in studying states of altered consciousness induced by psychotropic drugs. How far was it possible to go in understanding these phenomena of modification of consciousness if, in order to be objective, the researchers remained outside the experience under investigation, “coldly” measuring physiological changes, taking note of modifications in observable behaviour, and recording the sounds their subjects were making and their often disconnected words? I must admit that I lost track of that methodological breakthrough and some of you are probably better informed about recent developments in that line of research. In any event one could say that this research strategy has at least justified some rather beautiful hallucinatory experiences on the part of a few courageous researchers. But I don't intend to talk about that. May it be sufficient to underline that, in my opinion, elaboration of a perspective which includes the researcher's state of consciousness and as a result mobilizes his subjectivity could be highly productive for somatic education. But let's have another experience before going any further.

#### **Third EXPERIENTIAL PROPOSAL**

**Please try to understand the meaning of the following text, but don't do any of the movements suggested in it. Or better still, read the text aloud to a colleague who will do the movements while you observe what he or she does as you read.**

**Once again find a comfortable sitting position.**

**Now fix a point on the horizon.**

**Close your eyes, lift the head towards the ceiling. Then open your eyes and notice that, with the head in this position, the eyes are looking at another point above the first one. Return to the starting position.**

**Keep your eyes on the first point straight in front on the horizon and with the tip of your nose begin drawing circles in space. Start with tiny circles, slowly increasing their size in a gradually expanding spiral which you then reduce again to return to the very first circle. Three or four times, slowly, first in one direction, then in the other.**

**Now close your eyes and lift the head once again towards the ceiling. As you open your eyes decide if the higher reference point has remained the same or if you have gone beyond that first limit.**

**Come forward on your chair so that your body is no longer in contact with the back of the chair. In this position place your interlaced hands on the top of your head. The elbows are open and point to the side. Keep your head and elbows fixed in space as you begin to roll your pelvis on the seat, forward and back (Some people would say: rock your pelvis on the ischia, the two sitbones of the pelvis).**

**Do this pelvic rocking motion several times, slowly 7 or 8 times, while keeping the head and elbows fixed in space. If you can feel them, notice the movements of the trunk, the spinal column, the ribcage, the back, and the stomach.**

**Place your hands on the thighs, close your eyes, lift your head as if you wanted to look at the ceiling, and now open your eyes and observe where the higher of your two reference points is now situated. In other words are you still looking at the same point as before or somewhere higher up on the wall, maybe even on the ceiling?**

**Sit back comfortably and rest a little.**

What was your experience, if you took part in the preceding exploration without actually doing the suggested movements? How could you study this kind of movement process with the objectives of collecting one or two pupils' impressions, understanding the method and logic of the sequence, measuring and also assessing its effectiveness, and comprehending why the movement became more free for some participants while there was no change for others? How could practitioners who devise such movement-explorations be helped to improve them?

**By way of a conclusion**



The qualitative perspective characteristic of somatic education is founded on a state of absorption in sensory-motor and kinesthetic experience. The major part of what happens in experience belongs to the pre-verbal realm where somatic education offers opportunities for the most interesting and most difficult research. This would demand that the researcher plunges into a universe of subjectivity where language and reflection offer only occasional signposts. In this universe, the primary line of enquiry for any research has to be somatic experience as it is lived by a person. However, the researcher is going to run the risk of loosing the security of boundaries: between research and practice, between experience and reflection, between what is being lived and what is reported in an analytical frame of mind and conveyed in a reasonable and articulate way. *“Humanity has to learn how to live in a fluid world without either fixed landmarks or ultimate foundations”* (Varela, 1993b: p.132). Then one has to consider what kind of research and what methodology is appropriate. At issue is qualitative research into consciousness that needs to be pursued primarily within the maze of everybody’s “I”. Beyond that I would also wish that qualitative research in somatic education should rely more and more on that shared broad experiential base involving immersion in immediate and constant renewal of lived embodiment. From that vantage point we might be able to devise qualitative research methods which include the real life experience of breathing and everything else happening within the autonomic nervous system; of sensory perception mediated by the skin and muscles; of all aspects of posture and movement, including the vestibular aspect, and all the dimensions of body consciousness in relation to space which are the very foundations of our sense of individuality. I would like to close with the following words by Israel Rosenfield:

*“A brain does not function independently of the body it exists in.”* (Rosenfield, 1992:139)

*“The pattern of acquisition of body image and, with it, of knowledge of objects suggests how central body image is to our understanding of the world. Notions of space, objects, and self reference depend on body image and they cannot be separated”* (Rosenfield, 1992:62).

*“The unconscious body image is the system of reference for our subjectivity”* (Rosenfield, 1993:148).

*“Continuity of the sense of being alive is created by movement”* (Rosenfield, 1993:147).

Reading this author and a number of others quoted here and elsewhere, one really has the impression that we are only at the beginning of an important trend involving re-appropriation of the living body in cutting edge scientific research. Somatic education offers an exceptional

way of plunging into the very heart of experiencing the nature of consciousness. That is where research is waiting for us. See you there – with or without signposts.

October 28, 1994

(Translation by Ilana Nevill)

### Notes

- 1) The FELDENKRAIS METHOD<sup>®</sup> is the registered trade mark of the North American Feldenkrais Guild.
- 2) From 1992 the Quebec Association for Somatic Education was involved in creation of a network embracing many specific approaches with the aim of establishing somatic education as a domain in its own right. Six approaches are represented (as of 1994) in the association: the Alexander Technique, Holistic Gymnastics (Louise Ehrenfried), “Anti-Gymnastics” (Thérèse Bertherat’s approach to kinetic awareness), Body-Mind Centering, Laban-Bartenieff Fundamentals, the Feldenkrais Method.
- 3) The American magazine *Somatics* constitutes a unique source of reference for somatic education as a discipline. Since 1976 *Somatics* has been published twice a year by the Novato Institute, 1516 Grant Avenue, suite 212, Novato, CA 94945.
- 4) See *The Newsletter of the Study Project in Phenomenology of the Body*, Elisabeth A. Behnke, P.O. Box 0-2, Felton CA 950 18 U.S.A.
- 5) Sadly one of the co-founders of the group, my dear friend Roger Tessier died last year. The group itself no longer exists. (This note dates from August 2002)

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### **Abstract**

Somatic Education is the name of a new disciplinary field which focuses on the living body, on the biological basis of consciousness and awareness, and on movement as experienced in space. The Feldenkrais Method and all other methods for somatic education share the need for qualitative research: to formulate their theories and define the scientific basis of their concepts; to measure the effects of their practices; to understand and improve the training process for practitioners and teachers. The paradoxical nature of verbally conducted research dealing with a non-verbal research object such as the body also needs to be clarified. Any researcher concerned with the quality of somatic education must bring to the research process an awareness of her/his own body. This is both a characteristic feature and an undeniable necessity for such research.