Somatic/Embodied Learning and Adult Education

“A somatic approach to education integrates, as an existential whole, the experiential history of individuals with their current experience. It implies an education that trusts individuals to learn from their ability to attend and to listen to the information they are receiving from the interaction of self with the environment” (Sellers-Young 1998, p. 176). Somatic or embodied knowing is experiential knowledge that involves senses, perception, and mind/body action and reaction (Matthews 1998). Western culture has been dominated by the separation of cognitive knowledge from embodied knowledge and the distrust and denigration of bodily knowing (Simon 1998). More recently, developments in mind/body research (Weiss 2001) and feminist and postmodernist discourse (Davis 1997; Green 2000) have turned the attention of adult educators to somatic learning.

Education has traditionally emphasized linguistic, aural, and visual learning (Sellers-Young 1998), and physicality has been viewed as something that must be tamed or controlled to achieve cognitive performance (Stinson 1998). However, evidence of the contextual and situated nature of learning and the value of tacit knowledge (Durrance 1998; Simon 1998) points to the importance of an approach that respects the whole of the sentient, embodied learner (Matthews 1998). Issues arising from this somatic approach include the following: (1) recognition of the body as a source of knowledge—learners become adept at exposing the process of constructing knowledge and (de)legitimizing knowledge claims (Gustafson 1999); (2) empowerment/resistance to dominant culture—awareness of bodily experience disengages learners from “the apprenticeship of observation” (Fortin 1998, p. 52) and prepares them to question the primacy of dominant knowledge sources (ibid.); and (3) a means of developing empathy and respecting diversity—Barlas (2001), Gustafson (1999), and Todd (2001) suggest that awareness of and respect for our own somatic responses and the sharing of insights about embodied experiences open us to alternative perspectives.

Chapman (1998) identifies two paths for adult educators: the Embodied Way, in which a more holistic approach to curriculum design, teaching, learning, and research brings the body back into educational theory and practice; and the Body Project, recognizing the body’s place in the classroom as well as the ways in which classrooms, teachers, learners, and institutions construct the body as gendered, raced, diseased, disabled, and sexually oriented. The following resources provide insights from sociology, dance, nursing, and adult education for using somatic approaches to learning.

Resources


Participating in a learning environment into which the diversity of the whole self was invited provided the learners with the experience of inclusivity. Whole-person learning experiences (imaginal, somatic, affective, intellectual) contributed to learners’ capacities to include the whole personhood of the individual.


A study of six adults who had experience with body-centered approaches to somatic education shows how subjects use their somatic learning in everyday situations of distress, particularly when they are suffering from emotional discomfort.


Within the framework of the body as a significant site for learning, case studies are used to support the claim of ontological performance (practical embodied actions) as a way to approach adult learning for and at work.


Somatic knowing is a source of knowing more fundamental than culture and could help educators and philosophers in making moral distinctions.


Narrative includes the cognitive, affective, spiritual, and somatic dimensions of personhood. Thus narrative offers a view of a self that is multiple and complex, dynamic and changing.


Discusses ways of working with the body in practice, theorizing, and research. Urges adult educators to become bodily conscious and, when encouraging learners to start with their own experiences, to embody what they preach.

Clark, M. C. “Off the Beaten Path: Some Creative Approaches to Adult Learning.” New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education (The New Update on Adult Learning Theory) no. 89 (Spring 2001): 83-91.

Discusses the renewed recognition of the body as a source of knowledge and shows how somatic awareness offers creative alternatives for adult learning.


Illustrates how body movement and art can be used in teaching and learning in adult education.


Discusses how to enhance the teaching of critical social analysis at the college level with a focus on somatic and experiential learning modalities. Presents several exercises aimed at amplifying differences in thoughts, feelings, and somatic experiences.


Examines the role of the body as socially shaped and historically colonized territory and as the focus of individual women’s struggles.
for autonomy and self-determination, drawing on insights from contemporary feminist theories of gender and power.

Durrance, B. “Some Explicit Thoughts on Tacit Learning.” Training and Development 52, no. 12 (December 1998): 24-29. Discusses tacit learning, the bringing together of mind and body by practice, and how to incorporate it into training. Includes descriptions of exercises that reveal tacit knowledge.


Game, A. “Sociology’s Emotions.” Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology 34, no. 4 (November 1997): 385-399. Examines the place of emotion in knowledge and the ways in which a consideration of emotion contributes to an understanding of embodied knowledge practices.

Green, J. “Social Somatic Theory, Practice, and Research: An Inclusive Approach in Higher Education Dance.” In Dancing in the Millennium Conference Proceedings, comp. by J. Crone-Willis and J. LaPointe-Crump, pp. 213-217. Congress on Research in Dance, Dance Critics Association, National Dance Association, Society of Dance History Scholars, 2000. Bodily experience is not neutral or value free; it is shaped by backgrounds, experiences, and sociocultural habits. It is necessary to study the sociocultural effects on the body as well as how bodies work in practice.


Heshusius, L., and Ballard, K., eds. From Positivism to Interpretivism and Beyond: Tales of Transformation in Educational and Social Research (The Mind-Body Connection). New York: Teachers College Press, 1996. Papers discuss ways of knowing that enable the discovery of meanings that are not adequately captured by positivist, reductionist, or mechanistic methods but are found through the wisdom of the body.

Matthews, J. C. “Somatic Knowing and Education.” Educational Forum 62, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 236-242. Somatic knowing is as central to daily competence as analytically discursive, distanced knowing. An embodied education grounded in somatics is holistic and values areas typically neglected or trivialized in education, such as the arts.

Michelson, E. “Re-membering: The Return of the Body to Experiential Learning.” Studies in Continuing Education 20, no. 2 (November 1998): 217-233. The disconnection between mind and body that characterizes Western thought rejects the experiences of the body as a part of experiential learning. Because experience is located in the body, experiential learning is better understood as a process of “re-membering.”


Prichard, C. “Embodied Knowing, Knowledge Management and the Reconstruction of Post-compulsory Education.” Paper presented at the Critical Management Studies Conference, University of Manchester, England, July 1999. <http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/research/ejrot/cmsconference/papers_info/know.htm> If knowing is a human facility situated inside the bodies and minds of people, then the task of knowledge management becomes how to make this knowledge explicit, to reconstruct the learning process so that this valuable knowledge can be shared.


Sellers-Young, B. “Somatic Processes: Convergence of Theory and Practice.” Theatre Topics 8, no. 2 (September 1998): 173-187. Somatic knowledge does not simply mean “knowledge of the body” but knowledge gained through the body. A somatic approach combines individuals’ current and historical experience and offers a new way to view the self.


This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0013. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. Trends and Issues Alerts may be freely reproduced and are available at <http://ericcave.org/tia.asp>.