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WHEN DID THE PILOT SESSION TAKE

PLACE

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INHABITING YOUR BODY AND TAME YOUR WORDS, TRAINING FOR ADULT EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS

Case study of a training created by Élan Interculturel and Amélie Schweiger, led by Amélie Schweiger

WHY TO EMBARK ON SUCH AN ADVENTURE ?

The idea to develop body and voice training opportunities for trainers and educators came quite spontaneously from observations we made in different workshops we were offering for adult educators. We found the difference striking between some people that had an almost magical presence that filled the room, and everyone wanted to pay attention – even when what they were actually saying was not particularly interesting - and others whose message was ground shaking and exciting, yet somehow in the way of the delivery many simply got lost. Some of us attributed to such differences to “charisma” even to some form of “sex appeal”, some innate quality that one either has or has not. Yet others believed it was more a question of tricks and techniques that anyone could acquire and reach peak performance with the newly found powers. None of us thought, at that point, that what we’re after touches some basic elements in our human condition.

But it got a lot clearer, when we asked participants why they would want to attend such a training. What we found is that their motivations, wishes, desires went way beyond the mere question of efficiency of vocal and non-verbal communication, to include questions of presence, of embodiment, of relating to others, of being seen and accepted. We’d like to start the account of our workshop with the exploration of these wishes and motivations, so that you can better understand what we did.

In their application/ inscription forms, our would-be participants talked about five quite distinct types of motivations and desires.

Finding a way back to the body

[What would you like to learn?]

...« I think I need to be embodied and be more aware of my body! »

...« I would like to improve my relationship with the body (I’m rather cerebral) »

...« To be more embodied, more present in my body, I am too much in my head, my fear of not being up to it, of never doing enough... »

...« To inhabit my body more and be less in my head. To go down into my body. »

...« I would like to have a better knowledge of my body, to explore its possibilities... I think I have a lot to learn! and to be aware of! »

...« live in greater understanding of my body »

What would seem evidence, that we are embodied creatures whose mind and body function, as an undetachable whole, is obviously not so. And in this our participants are not really different from the average modern European citizen. The desire to be “more embodied” “improve my relationship with the body” etc. is symptomatic of a society where people learnt to value mind over body, live in the stories of their narrative self and trust conceptual self-awareness as opposed to embodied self-awareness. Some would attribute the split to right and left hemispheres of the brain, some of our sedentary way of life since the agricultural revolution, and some to religious dichotomies inherited from dualist thought. Whatever the origin, the consequence is the same: a society whose members tend to forget how their physical matter is one with their mind. We don’t have that experience anymore, we either deal with one or the other, and one is easier than the other. So we knew, that finding our way back to our bodies will be an important goal, and our strategy to reach it was through developing embodied self-awareness.

« Embodied self-awareness is the ability to pay attention to ourselves, to feel our sensations, emotions, and movements online, in the present moment, without the mediating influence of judgmental thoughts (Am I doing this right? Why am I so clumsy? I wonder if anyone is watching?). Embodied self-awareness is composed of sensations like warm, tingly, soft, nauseated, dizzy; emotions such as happy, sad, threatened; and body senses like feeling the coordination (or lack of coordination) between the arms and legs while swimming, or sensing our shape and size (fat or thin), and sensing our location relative to objects and other people. » (Fogel 2013)



Having a presence that is strong enough

[What would you like to learn?]

...« *To impose myself when necessary* »

...« *I would like to improve my presence, to assert myself.* »

...« *To better catch the attention of young audiences* »

...« *Take up more space and have more presence.* »

...« *I would like to assume more, to exist more, not to apologise for being here* »

...« *To be heard and respected when I express a request, or even sometimes just manage to formulate a request and have it taken into account* »

...« *To change the image of shyness, I'm sending to others* »

Clearly, it is not enough to be embodied, if our embodiment does not give us a sense of presence, or if we feel that others don't perceive our presence well enough. If the mere contours of a body are not sufficient, what makes us perceive - externally or internally - that the presence is as strong as should be. What we do know that a sense of "I want to exist more" "have more presence" highlights a sense of something missing.



Efficiency of expression and transmission

[What would you like to learn?]

...« *to become "more expressive" in front of a group and in particular in front of classes of young people* »

...« *I find it difficult to express myself in public, I don't know what to do with my body, I put my voice too low* »

...« *to be able to say things, to be more pedagogical in my way of speaking* »

...« *Improve my posture to be more fluid in my trainings* »

...« *I find it difficult to express myself in front of institutions or people in my hierarchy and to order my ideas and arguments. I easily lose my temper in front of people I consider to have good verbal skills.* »

...« *I would like to improve the management of the space, regarding my place and that of the students* »

...« *To better manage my posture in order to better accompany my speech with my body, improve listening and connection to my body* »

...« *How to use the body to support the transmission of something to young adults, adults - even foreigners* »

...« *better interact with the world around me* »

...« *I have a number of tics that interfere with my non-verbal communication.* »

...« *The challenge to be myself, to be aware of my intentions and gestures, to make sure they are coherent* »

...« *I would like to learn how to create a welcoming space, a collaborative atmosphere with my body position.* »

...« *The wording "inhabiting one's body" spoke to me. I think that what emanates from our physical posture is very important in our relationship with others and I am very keen to explore this dimension.* »

Many participants sensed the need to improve the way they express themselves and be at the service of a better communication with others, in particular with learners.

Give back the place of body in learning

...« *Learners are not very comfortable with their bodies, maybe because I don't use it enough or badly in my teaching.* »

« *To highlight the link between the body and the brain in learning and memory* »

...« *Convincing people that the body is essential in every learning process in order to take possession of the space in which learning takes place, which is not only cerebral.* »

...« *As a teacher of FLE and Spanish, I believe that non-verbal communication plays a very important role in a language course as a lot of the messages are conveyed through gestures or theatrics, especially when working with beginners* »

...« *To convince others through my own physical ease of the importance of movement in learning French and in all learning. It is even more relevant with women refugees or asylum seekers who have been culturally taught to leave all the physical and sound space to men.* »



Ultimately, as educators, our mission would be helping others access their own embodied awareness in the learning experience we provide them. This motivation was very clear for many of our participants.

HOW WE PROCEEDED

The needs we found turned our attention away from communication-, self-presentation- and vocal techniques towards a deeper work, focusing on finding our way back to what Fogel calls an “embodied self-awareness”.

1. OPENING UP AN EMBODIED RATHER THAN CONCEPTUAL LEARNING SPACE

In his restorative body work, Fogel recommends “slowing down” as a necessary first step, for whoever wishes to overcome past routines of disembodied experience, to open up perceptions and awareness. For us, it was important to open a learning space to a different type of awareness, that would not go through analysis and conceptualisations, but help develop the awareness of the senses. The 5 rhythms dance proved to be a useful tool in providing this space. This improvisative free dance form looks more like a mediation session than a dance class. It offers a musical landscape of different rhythms inviting dancers

to experience the present, being as little concerned as possible about judgment, planning and form. What’s more, each of the “5 rhythms” have their own quality that is interesting to explore: flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical and stillness invite different types of movements and postures. Through the diversity of the musical landscape and the guided instruction of Amélie it worked as a laboratory for learning perception and sensing without interpreting and analysing.



2. OFFER RESOURCES

In a previous phase of our project, we identified six dimensions that we used to assess our vocal/non-verbal repertoire: breathing, grounding, voice, movement, space, relating. Some of these we targeted directly, and some indirectly.

Movement and space



If Amélie never instructed the group to perform particular steps or postures and clearly condemned the idea of even hinting that there would be rights ways of standing, walking, moving etc., she did encourage the tasting and exploring different types of movement, different ways of occupying the space. This was partly aiming at what would be called “demechanisation” in the language of forum theatre (freeing oneself of mechanised routines) and partly at encouraging to go out of the comfort zone and finding new zones of curiosity, experimentation and possibly pleasure. For instance, several times we heard the invitation to “take a risk” in terms of rhythm, of space and form.

Grounding

Grounding was part of our free dance session, also a couple of “walking” exercises were directly stimulating this perception of our own weight, how our feet touch the ground. But at one point, Amélie invited everyone to visualise carrying in their arms at the height of the hips, a quite heavy hairy mammal, and walk with it. Then dance with it. The idea came up as some participants (one in particular) were quite elusive with the conventional grounding exercises. Grounding is probably a good key to many of us who wish to find “more presence” or “richer presence”.

Relating

Amélie often combined elements of theatre and contact dance into the sessions. Movement-theatre would come up for instance, in proposals where duos were invited to play authority/submission or fusion/separately. But maybe even more instructive were the proposals where the duo did not have any specific role to focus on, only each other. Some of these activities had easy lead-on, such as an image of painting each other with imagined brushes on our hands and then other body parts, but of course these images were only the trick to turn away potential apprehensions from a proximity that may be unusual for the participants. The playful frame of the exercise led several participants to be very surprised of the intimacy they reached and very happy with having the experience. These duos were more than mere coupe dances and expressions of intimacy. Fogel (1993) calls “co-regulation” the process “in which two individuals dynamically coordinate actions into a smooth joint performance by means of sensing the boundaries between self and other”. For him, such co-regulation is a key feature of embodied awareness.



Structured duos and trios were not the only field for practicing contact and relating. In fact, open collective improvisations were a next step. In these, dancers are not organised into pairs or constellations through Amélie’s instruction, instead, they need to take their chances, risking rejection, regulating the right proximity whether with another person or groups. These improvisations constituted the main laboratory of our relational skills (see the collective impro activity sheet).

Playful self-reflection, humour



the interior critique can be debilitating and paralysing, as long as we can’t make fun of it. A couple of exercises aimed just that: putting in a scene as a collaborative tableau, our worst images of an educator (or of a learner, as a matter of fact) pushing them to the extreme and then turning them upside down. Inviting transformation of what was perceived as rigid and immutable.

3. INTEGRATING EXPERIENCE WITH CONCEPTUAL SELF-AWARENESS THROUGH WORDS

As far as we know, there is no scientific consensus yet on how a lived experience is integrated into memory and self, other than through the narrative the conceptual self makes of it. So, it was important for us to “keep in mind, the mind” and not forget the word. We did this in two distinct ways. We had debriefing and sharing circles at the end of sessions based on movement or singing. In these sessions Amélie insisted to keep the reflections strictly on one’s personal experience. She corrected participants when they ventured into a distant, impersonal phrasing: instead of “when people move...” they were

invited to say “when I move...”. We also had circles at the end of the days where we asked participants how they connect what we did to their professional practice. But particularly rich were the activities where writing, speaking and even answering questions about the professional identity were incorporated into movement activities (see the “challenges and talents” activity). Playing together with the words and the movements helped us to practice how more conceptual work can be done with as much embodied presence as possible – a link that we ultimately came here to practice.

WHAT WE ACHIEVED

"I observed that my voice settled down and had a fuller presence, more serenity in front of others. The video activity helped to boost my confidence and trust in my future professional path"

"this rich experience boosted my self-confidence and my awareness of the body and the pleasures it can offer me"

"I made a lot of links between danse and my work, so I'm sure I'll use them in trainings and my daily life"

- We saw that even participants who do not have a dance practice – let alone free dance – could engage with and make sense of the proposed activities, even when they implied free movement.

- Participants were able to make connections between the free movement / experiential tasks and their professional life. We asked them to make such connections regularly (at the end of each day) and the connection points seemed easy for most of them to identify

- Connections and contacts were possible through movement often going beyond of what people imagined as the borders of their comfort zone. This was possible through playful activities that were slowly led into more and more difficulty without participants realising they were about to cross borders.

- The playful / joyful / collective musical – dancing landscape facilitated the access

- Without specifically targeting behaviour that participants perceived as "problematic" (like swinging from left to right while speaking) many of them saw this behaviour either reduced or become not disturbing, which was actually or aim.

- We asked to rate, perceived change at the end of the 5 day workshop, after having seen a video recorded at the end, inviting participants to rate to what extent they observe changes with respect to the beginning of the training. Averaged ranged from 3,14 to 3,71, albeit with big variations. This means that for each dimension (breathing, grounding, space, etc.) there were at least two people who perceived "very much change". On average the highest change was on grounding, followed by movement and breathing – consistent with the foci of the workshop. The lowest change was on relating and voice, which were indeed less at the centre of the session. Also, the "little" reported change in relating may be the consequence of using a video for measurement, where participants were reading a text and not interacting with others.

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