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WHEN DID THE PILOT SESSION TAKE PLACE

March-May 2022, Paris, 24 hours



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Paris



To initiate the creation of the Voice training, Élan Interculturel presented a four-day long pilot workshop programme for educators in the Paris region between the end of March and the beginning of May 2022. With extensive experience in free dance and movement practices, and vocal release work, Peter Wilberforce joined Élan's team to create a workshop rich in voice and movement exploration.

There were 9 participants at the workshop, all of them women and most of them relatively young (from late twenties to mid-thirties). They represented a variety of educational fields: cultural mediation in museums working with individuals and groups; working with young people in social and emotional life, and mental health; accompanying migrants and refugees; supporting young adults in integration and empowerment. It was a mixed group in terms of previous dance, singing and presentation experience:

Their motivations were equally diverse. For many it was about accruing new skills themselves, while for others the emphasis was on what they could transmit to their own learners (eg: to the marginalized people who learn public speaking). For most of them, however, their motivation focused on personal and professional development, and in particular the desire to gain in self-confidence.

Taking these factors into account, it was clear from the beginning that we would not simply be focusing on transmitting technical skills to create an appearance of convincing non-verbal communication and vocal strength in an educational setting. Instead, we chose to explore deeper aspects of what it is to be a human being and more particularly an educator, meeting the needs and expectation of one's client group in the teaching environment. It was also clear we would not be offering "the one way" to speak right, stand right, sit right etc., etc.

HOW WE WORKED

As our pedagogical starting point, and before planning the training itself, there were a few key points on the nature of learning and communication to identify...

- In order to learn, we have to explore things we are not necessarily familiar with, may find challenging, and even frightening to begin with.
- In order to learn, we have to take risks and be prepared to fail. There is the possibility of learning when we fail, where we won't if we stay within the known field of our awareness and knowledge.
- In order for our system to learn and integrate a teaching, we don't necessarily need to fully understand consciously a lived experience. Sometimes we just need to trust that a change will occur as a result of the exploration of new territory, without having to name exactly what is happening.
- It is not about seeking the "right" way to do something, but rather the awakening of one's curiosity to explore new territory, learn new things and integrate new information and skills, so that the educator has a more evolved vocabulary (physical, vocal, emotional, strategic) which can be engaged in response to any particular teaching environment and moment.
- Learning can occur when we witness others as much as when we act ourselves.
- Learning skills that are repeatable and sustainable occurs when we are able to bring our attention to the details as much as the big picture: our human being is a fully integrated system, made up of parts, both independent and interdependent. Even if the immediate shift or change is small, the effect of this will ultimately be felt throughout the system, if it is fully integrated, effecting change however unconsciously.
- Stress and pressure put tension in the person and so limit a trainee's ability to participate freely and stay open to new ideas and experiences. Developing an atmosphere of play, mutual support and non-judgement is vital for easeful learning and being able to try out activities that might at first seem challenging.

The days were structured to create a mixed programme of work, focusing on different aspects of the person, their awareness of body and voice, and relationship to their role as an educator:

- Playing: games to create a relaxed and convivial atmosphere in the group in order for participants to feel at ease in more demanding exercises, and confident to dare new things and take risks in front of their fellow-trainees.
- Learning: specific body and voice "anchoring" exercises to help participants prepare themselves for the teaching environment, and to maintain a dynamic and creative connection to themselves throughout the teaching process.
- Exploring: aspects of embodiment, physical mobility, and vocal ease through activities based in a variety of somatic, movement and sound practices - the Feldenkrais Method; yoga; 5Rhythms' dance practice; Roy Hart Voice work and The Naked Voice of Chloë Goodchild.
- Theatre games: to explore, through movement, sound and words, the educator's relationship to their role(s) as an educator, the challenges of being in a presentation situation and their relationship to a learning group



Throughout the 4 days we used different modalities to offer different ways into experiencing and learning: free movement, drawing, sounding, playing, theatre games, conversation, body awareness practices, group feedback. The "learnt exercises" were repeated at intervals across the 4 days, so they became more familiar to participants, and therefore, independently repeatable, and easily integrated into the participants' personal and working environments after completing the training. We worked progressively through the "exploring" activities and "theatre games", increasing the nature of the challenge at each step, moving initially with the personal to ultimately addressing the professional, so that participants could feel a gradual evolution in their understanding and facility while maintaining a high degree of self-confidence throughout. At each stage of the training time was given to integrating the experiences.



DAY 1 AND 2. THE NATURE OF BEING HUMAN IN THIS WORLD

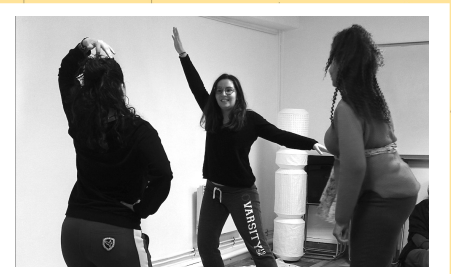
BEING AT HOME

Everything starts and finishes with the individual, one's ability to connect to oneself, to learn to be at ease "at home" in one's own body and build a more complete awareness of what is happening there. Being "at home" allows us to become aware of how we are using the body, the voice and breath. We can start to identify how restrictions (through physical tensions, non-optimal use of the body, emotional interferences) may limit our capacity to communicate and relate freely. Awakening our curiosity to our bodies and our voices, exploring what is happening in the present moment, facilitates an opening of space (physical, emotional, mental). In this space there is the possibility of choice and, therefore, of change. Thus, the process of discovering possible new positive habits and strategies begins, all the while resting fully "at home".

Once we have started to feel more at ease "at home" we can start to open to and explore what is happening around us. Ultimately, when we are fully present and active, the two spaces (home and the world) are in interplay: what we receive is an offering from the world, and what we offer is received by the world. This quality of "conversation" allows the educator to give and receive at the same time, speak and listen, offer and welcome, so that there is a natural state of continuous adaptation. This is the nature of being human. It is a dance. This "conversation" brings us to a state of being "at home in the world", a state which allows us to move more freely, and follow where the space is. Where there is space, there is movement, and, therefore, choice.

In order to be with what is, we need to evolve a certain clarity of vision of the world. That is, to be with what is and not what one thinks it is. To let go of judgement and interpretation of what we perceive and develop rather a neutral and open place of perception. For the most part, such judgements and interpretations are an expression of our own psychological functioning, therefore, informed by our own stories, prejudices and fears. This limits our ability to respond fluently and openly in challenging situations where we may be confronted by situations outside our immediate knowledge.

In order to find this, clarity of vision, we are seeking a place of "neutral" where we can be alive, alert and responsive, unencumbered by our habitual judgements, stories and interpretations. In this state, the body is relaxed, the mind clear, the body and voice available. We are in a state of dynamic balance - between up and down, left and right, forwards and backwards, inner and outer. We can respond quickly, lightly, appropriately, and creatively to stimuli (from the inside - eg. spontaneous inspiration - and from the outside - eg. unexpected changes in the environment). The "neutral" gives us a settled, grounded space to see what is possible in any given moment and choose wisely, moving away from our centre without losing connection and able to return with ease, moving with whatever next arises.



BETWEEN EARTH AND SKY

To give attention to the body and the voice is to give attention to the whole human being. Any exploration of the body - how it functions (optimally or sub-optimally) and its expressive capacities (physical, vocal, creative) - will necessarily equally impact the emotional, mental and spiritual aspect of the human being, both conscious and unconscious.

With the evolution of humanity, the body is designed to stay in the vertical plan with the minimum of effort. This capacity to stand with ease allows us to see and to be seen, to connect to our wider environment and act creatively in the world... Over the millennia this natural ease when standing has been lost to many, limiting severely our ability to be present in the moment and responsive to our environment. Rediscovering an easeful relationship to the vertical is essential to freeing our energy to serve our intentions - connection, communication, transmission - and the manner we choose to express them - movement, speech, creative gesture.

Ease of verticality is achieved through rediscovering the natural dynamic balance between attraction and repulsion, two opposing and complementary forces: the body resting on the ground in gravity (attraction/downwards) and the body's natural buoyancy to rise in the world (repulsion/upwards). It is the natural balance of the body between and connecting earth and sky.

This play of opposing and complementary forces naturally facilitates movement in the whole body, inviting muscular release, which consequently creates a sensation of space in the person. If we accept the idea that movement occurs in space, the greater the sense of space within oneself the greater the range and variety of movement possible. The greater the range and variety of our movement vocabulary, the more able we are to respond to a diverse range of situations (human relations), circumstances (constraints of time, emotions or personnel) and environments (physical world).



The explorative pathway for this aspect of the work was progressive and was a recurring thread through the two days. We started on the floor, bringing our attention to all aspects of the body and how it rested on the ground. We engaged breath and sound to dynamise our connection to the different levels of the body (legs and pelvis, torso and arms, head and neck). Maintaining this soft quality of attention into the vertical, we developed a sense of the body's connection downwards into the ground and identified the coordinates of the body rising upwards: soles of the feet, sacrum and spine, occipital, top of the skull.

Subsequently, we used a range of exercises based on the Feldenkrais Method, Alexander technique and theatre games to further develop our sense of connection to the body, connecting downwards into the ground, easeful verticality and openness to the world. These exercises can be challenging for some participants, as they require a slowing-down of habitual processes, which many find frustrating. But without this deceleration it is impossible to sense the greater detail of what is happening in their body, and participants can remain hooked on the idea of succeeding rather than exploring.

Despite the challenges this work was well-received and had a positive effect on how the participants subsequently moved. This attention on verticality helped us develop a short preparation checklist, useable in a teaching situation to bring an educator back to their neutral, open state: "feet on the ground, the shape of the body in the space, breath in the body, feeling". And along with the explorations of the 5Rhythms® dance practice (see below), these two pieces of body work give the participants plenty of material for exploring the quality of embodiment and presence.

HAVING A VOICE

The exploration of voice started with the premise of the body as an expressive instrument - physical, vocal and creative - which we can get to know better and learn to use more effectively. The work was offered on the basis that if the body was free and mobile, the voice would equally express more easily and fluently. The principles of working gently and slowly, bringing detailed awareness to what was happening "at home", was once again used when approaching vocal production. The other principle of "there not being a right way" was encouraged, allowing the trainees to give voice bypassing fears of getting it wrong, singing out of tune, not sounding good.

The initial approach to this work is to invite soft sound and keep the focus of one's attention on what is happening in the body rather than thinking about what is being projected. As with perceiving and moving in the world, so sounding is addressed by staying "at home", fully present in the body, exploring how we can open up the internal spaces and release restrictive tensions to make the body more available as a fully resonating instrument. We invited a spirit of play into the voice work across the two days. Acknowledging and meeting the fears carried by many, we proposed exercises that focused on the exploration of all possible vocal sounds in a playful setting: animal sounds, throwing names like pebbles into water, singing a partner dance, movement and sound improvisations with a partner, the whole group improvising together. Trainees spontaneously discovered a wider range of sounds simply by playing, once they felt confident of the possibilities and the absence of restrictions.



Some of the participants had wished for a more technical approach to the voice work, technical exercises they could apply directly in their work environment. Our approach did not offer them this, but the work to prepare the body and the person to play, and the building of the participants' confidence through physical and vocal improvisations offered a dynamic sense of the body as the instrument, and ultimately facilitated greater vocal confidence in the participants. For most this was a positive experience.

LETTING GO OF LIMITATIONS

A core practice used in this pilot training was the 5Rhythms® dance practice, a free movement meditation practice developed by Gabrielle Roth in the 1970s and 80s, and widely practiced around the world. It offers a space for participants to let go of ideas of moving well and dancing beautifully, and instead focuses on how the body wishes to and can move at any given moment regardless of the aesthetic of whatever emerges. The five rhythms of the name of the practice offer a map to explore different qualities of movement, familiar to everyone in daily life. There are no steps to learn and no rules to follow. This practice offers a great space for trainees to move freely, discovering new possibilities for moving, which helps build self-confidence even as their movement vocabulary develops.

The practice was used a number of times across the 4 days, initially to bring the women into a greater awareness of their bodies, and how they felt to be "at home", and then as a map to explore their relationship to the world and to their

roles and feelings as educators. In the first two days, with the focus primarily on the individual's experience, the practice gave the participants an intimate space to explore the possibility of movement in the whole body. It equally gave permission to give shape, movement and sound to feelings often encountered in the role of educators.

The simplicity and power of this practice in which there is no notion of success or failure, rather a focus simply on what is going on in the present moment, gave the women a positive sense of being "at home", and helped build and carry their self-confidence in the more formal, profession-oriented exercises.

AT THE END OF 2 DAYS

The focus of the first two days on the personal experience was very positive. Receiving attention and being able to give attention to oneself created a great openness and willingness amongst the participants. There was an easy and playful atmosphere. The women were all willing to dive into all the activities, and there was very quickly a high degree of trust between them. The ritual theatre at the end of Day 1, exploring the different feelings related to being an educator, allowed the women to see themselves as a coherent group united in

the shared experience; a quality of "We're all in it together" emerged. The spontaneous presentations at the end of Day 2 gave each woman an opportunity to test the insecurity of transmitting something to an audience, but with the security of a supportive group as public. These were very touching and gave everybody greater insight into the being and experience of the other participants; a real experience of empathy, which can be so important in a teaching environment.

DAY 3 AND 4 THE NATURE OF BEING AN EDUCATOR IN THIS SOCIETY

There are certain basic principles that apply to being human, that are key in an evolving teaching situation:

1. The capacity to stay grounded and present in one's own body and how one functions in a particular situation.
2. The ability to be mobile and creatively responsive to one's own state of being and the external environment.

If it is accepted that everything is constantly in movement, being in the world requires a person to accept (even welcome) a state of constant adaptation and evolution. So, just as we accept that gravity allows the body to rest on the ground, so we can accept the same body is equally in constant movement - internally and externally. Inviting a spirit of play allows us to engage fully but lightly, moving with the possibility of change at any moment. This allows the educator to avoid getting stuck on one single strategy, prevents self-identification with one's role or task, and facilitates fluent and creative response to any given situation.

In a teaching environment, there are many factors in constant evolution, which the educator must hold in their awareness, even as they might have a clear objective to achieve, a thread to follow through to an appropriate end. For educators, we could say that the thread of one's intention - what one wants to transmit - is the pathway through a landscape, the landscape being of the external environment - learners, location, conditions, etc. While the information to be transmitted might be clear, the environment will most likely be in constant change. The educator, therefore, needs to learn how to navigate the ever-changing landscape, adapting and shifting to maintain a positive connection with their learning group, even as they maintain their direction towards the intended finishing point.

Bearing these points in mind, the intentions of Days 3 and 4 were to build on the work of Days 1 and 2, while starting to explore more particularly the competencies required of an educator and inviting a greater focus on the skills required to stay alert to the task of teaching and their particular environment.

At the beginning of Day 3, after revisiting some of the "learnt" resource exercises (auto-massage, the Cycle of Life breathing), the group focused on the relationship between two people through the 5Rhythms® practice. A first step in opening outwards from "at home" to being in the world, working entirely through the body in movement. Time was then taken to hear and share the participants' experiences in the weeks after the first 2 days leading up to the third day to assess what benefits they had experienced from the initial work, and inform the subsequent process.

The primary focus of the day was to explore the quality of play in the act of teaching, through undoing our rigid relationship to text - what it means and how we should deliver it - and to discover a more creative and playful, embodied relationship to the words, permitting a greater range of expression, even as the core meaning is transmitted. This was an extended process across the second half of the morning and through into the afternoon. Different techniques were used to "shake up" the participants' sense of what was the "correct" way to deliver their text, requiring them to integrate surprising changes in conditions and relationship while retaining a clear connection to their words. This necessarily demanded a high degree of dynamic presence and commitment, and required the trainees to abandon ideas of "getting it right" and rather respond instinctively to the demands of the situation.



At the beginning of the afternoon, following the thread started during the initial 2-day workshop on the participants' relationship to their role as educators, the group did a mind-mapping exercise focusing on three aspects of the task of teaching:

1. The different sorts of role which educators adopt in the teaching environment (e.g., explorer, pedagogue, seed-sower...)
2. The array of different postures of relationship educators have towards their learners (e.g., generous, playful, tolerant...)
3. The sensations and feelings that can arise for an educator in the teaching process (e.g., enthusiastic, confused, frustrated...)

The day finished with a presentation of texts. Participants were challenged to deliver these to the group while simultaneously attending to different and often disruptive actions, as well as integrating random interruptions from the viewers. Sadly, due to the choice to swap texts early in the day, once participants were asked to present them, their lack of familiarity rendered them unconfident in their delivery and a number of them felt they had "failed", feeling overwhelmed and ill-equipped for the task. The repercussions of this choice by the facilitator are a good reminder of the premise that participants in a learning situation need to feel comfortable and able to easily take risks and play. Once the person is in stress, the body, tends to close down, and so limits the ability of the person to respond creatively to the challenges of an exercise. Nevertheless, the previous work on freeing the text was very playful and led to a lot of laughter, offering the women a sense of freedom and play in the material they had to transmit.

Day 4 was very rich as a result of the Roles, Postures and Qualities exploration done on Day 3 which offered a lot of material for deeper exploration of participants' relationship to their role as educator and their changing and varied teaching situations.

We began with a short review process to hear how the group had experienced the previous day and its subsequent effects in their working and personal environments. Once again, as at the beginning of every session on each of the 4 days, the group returned to the "learnt" support exercises to further anchor them in their memories (auto-massage, Seven Sounds of Love). The major point of focus for the rest of the day was a final presentation by each participant of a learnt text - newspaper article, description of the event from history, extract from an instruction manual. The intention was for participants to present their text to the group, fully inhabiting their role as an educator in a shifting and surprising environment.



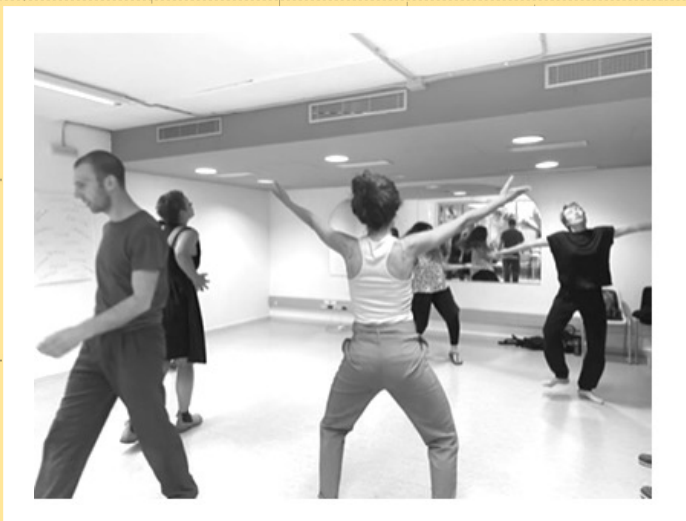
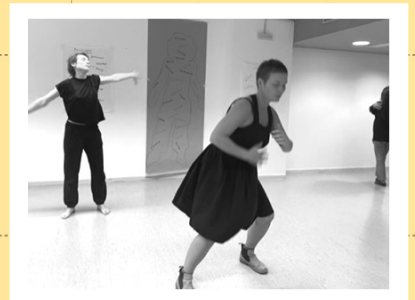
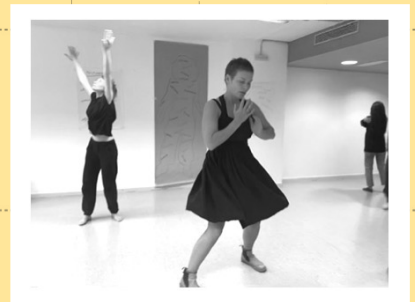
Returning to the 5Rhythms dance practice as primary movement practice in the training, the pathway of the 5 rhythms was used to explore the relationship of participants to the different "roles" previously identified on Day 3. The women were invited to move with 3 different roles:

1. One they enjoy using
2. One they are familiar with but don't often use
3. One which they actively avoid

The intention was to explore a greater embodiment of each adopted role, and the possibility of learning new ways of expression when we dare to explore the unfamiliar and the disliked. The process closely followed the map of the 5Rhythms:

1. FLOW - participants start "at home", moving with what they experience on the inside as they invite the qualities of each role, and let the body move freely.
2. STACCATO - participants open and connect to the world. How does each role move when it meets the outside environment?
3. CHAOS - how do the different roles move in unstable, shifting situations when attachment to get things right is a hindrance to creative communication? What do we need to let go of to stay present and responsive?
4. LYRICAL - exploring the possibility of play in each role and the participant's ability to shift without reflection from one modality to another in response to changing circumstances.
5. STILLNESS - arriving in a place of the present embodiment in the role, where the participant can hold a balanced connection to themselves and to the world, expressed through a clear, repetitive movement and to which a clear affirmatory verbal phrase is connected. This final phase can subsequently be used as a touchstone for evoking the qualities and capacities of each role.

Most of the participants dived into the 5Rhythms dance work with enthusiasm and worked with commitment as they explored the different roles they inhabit (or don't) as educators. This was an extremely positive experience for the women, one in which they could freely express themselves, explore sometimes difficult territory in safety and creatively, to arrive at a place of play and then clear grounded connection to each of the explored roles. The quality of "embodiment" became tangible.



With this material anchored in the participants' bodies, we used at the beginning of the afternoon to explore the prepared text, once again using playful approaches to invite a freer relationship to the words. The final "performative" exercise of the training was a presentation of one's text to the group. As before, the participants were given challenges in their transmission of the text:

1. The participant was invited to choose one of their 3 roles
2. The participant was then given a feeling to integrate into the role
3. The participant could be asked to take up a posture in relationship to the group
4. The participant could be asked to change role at any time throughout their presentation
5. The participant could be asked to change the feeling or posture at any time

Working with texts they knew this time, meant that participants were much more available to play during these presentations. This final activity drew many of the threads of the 4 days together and offered the participants a positive final experience in which they could gauge their progress through the training and assess what they had learnt which would be useful to them in the personal and professional environment.



OUR RESULTS

The initial attention on the person as an individual which gave the participants a great sense of freedom and play through the whole training, and allowed them to feel that who they are is important to how they are as educators and that there is no right way to do it. The subsequent and increased focus on the "professional" aspect of the training helped to connect the subjective sensorial work with work life.

Our participants seemed happy and could engage with the proposals, and their final satisfaction score (4,9/5) seems to support this too. Their words may be even more telling than their numbers.

"I think that when we speak in public, we are not necessarily aware of what our body and breathing is going through and in my personal case, I often think more about the content than the form and the body and breathing. The activities of the training allowed me to give back a place to the body, the voice and the breath and were really useful to become aware of everything that is going on with the body, the voice, the emotions and the breath."

"I really liked Peter's approach to body and voice work. I found it both very demanding and accessible."

I learned a lot, and it helped me to enrich my own trainer practice in public speaking. The group was also very supportive, it was a kind of refuge bubble. I didn't expect to learn so much and to get so much well-being and support as a trainer."

« The activities experienced in the workshops allowed me to get out of the inner judgement. I took pleasure in doing things differently by connecting to my feelings, by experiencing the joy of singing which I would rather avoid because I hate my voice (but there I was able to listen to my voice without judging it and criticising it, I felt lightness instead of tension, I had a lot of pleasure to live this singing experience with the others, I felt the strength of the group instead of its possible judgment). »

« I was able to feel more grounded thanks to the presentation activities, before I was swaying by putting the weight of my body on one foot, then on the other, or I was standing on my tiptoes...and I didn't really realise it, but thanks to this awareness and to Peter's enlightenment, I finally felt more connected to myself than to the anxious projections made on the group. »

IMPACT ON THE SIX DIMENSIONS

A quantitative assessment asked participants about their satisfaction and the perceived change in various relevant dimensions. We asked responses in a 1 to 5 scale where 1 meant "not at all" and 5 "very much" with the intermediary numbers "slight", "somewhat", "notable".

Participants perceived change on all the dimensions. The highest change was on "relating to others" (4,5) followed by use of space (4,3) and movements (4,1). Use of voice was 3,9 and grounding 3,8. The smallest change was on breathing, 3,7. There was a lot of variances in all dimensions, which means that on each of the dimensions there was at least one person who reported "very much" change. The modus (most frequent) answer was reporting "very much change" on three dimensions, and only one participant had not marked 'very much change' on any of the dimension – but she reported notable change on three dimensions.



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