

FORUM

Somatic Approaches to Academic Pedagogy: Notes from “Somatics, Scholarship, Somatic Scholarship: Materiality and Metaphor”

Sima Belmar

I organized the symposium “Somatics, Scholarship, Somatic Scholarship: Materiality and Metaphor” on February 27, 2015 at the University of California, Berkeley. This one-day event convened scholar-practitioners Marianne Constable (Rhetoric, UC Berkeley), Galen Cranz (Architecture, UC Berkeley), Michael Lucey (French & Comparative Literature, UC Berkeley), and Petra Kupperts (English, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), to share their reflections on the relationship between their body-mind practices and their academic research and teaching. We began with morning workshops in Iyengar yoga (Lucey), the Feldenkrais Method® (Constable), The Alexander Technique (Cranz), and social somatics/participatory performance (Kupperts). In the afternoon, we gathered for a roundtable discussion with graduate students from various departments at UC Berkeley, UC Davis, and the Graduate Theological Union, including Theater, Dance, & Performance Studies, South and Southeast Asian Studies, Interdisciplinary Studies, and Psychology. The event culminated in a panel discussion and Q&A with the symposium participants.

Most somatic practices are tied to the healing arts and are a complex blend of physical actions, thinking practices, verbal cues, and hands-on work. As a field, they focus on the efficient function of the self via a “somatic mode of attention” (Csordas 1993), an increased awareness of one’s physical and mental habits. The academic classroom is often a site of “from the neck up” processing, where the body fades into the background of all that mental labour. How, then, does the practice of attending to our habitual modes of thinking, reading, writing, and speaking appear in the classroom?

In line with this issue’s theme, this essay focuses on what the panellists had to say about how somatic practices shape pedagogical practices in the context of the university. Although the panellists differ in their approaches to “the body” and in the degree to which they explicitly mobilize somatic exercises in the classroom—Kupperts and Cranz have long integrated somatic principles in their research and teaching, whereas Constable and Lucey have drawn firmer boundaries between their academic and somatic pursuits—all four locate the academic seminar room as the site in which their embodied practices most clearly intersect with their academic work.

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Lucey, who stumbled into an Iyengar yoga class in England in 1982 while he was a student at Oxford, connects his yoga practice with his intellectual life through a set of conceptual issues that “push at the distinction between practical knowledge and intellectual knowledge.”¹ For Lucey, both French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of bodily knowledge (Bourdieu 2000, 128–63) and B.K.S. Iyengar’s notion of attentive awareness (Iyengar 2005, 21–64) influence his academic projects and physical practice. Attentive awareness, as Lucey understands it, is a particular state of

Sima Belmar holds a PhD in Performance Studies from the University of California, Berkeley and an MFA in Dance from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. She is currently a lecturer in the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies at Berkeley.

mind in which “your mind is full, focused, and relaxed at the same time.” Lucey seeks to work from and impart to his students “a knowledge that would not have to be processed through the brain but that would be in the body,” a bodily knowledge that exists “in a space that is not intellectual and yet is not exactly bodily but a space of awareness or attention.”

Like many students of somatic practices, Constable came to the Feldenkrais Method® via physical ailments, which, in her case, a doctor had labelled “sciatic pain.” The Method includes group lessons involving verbally guided movements taught in Awareness Through Movement® or ATM classes, and one-on-one, hands-on work called Functional Integration®. Constable describes the bones of a Feldenkrais exercise as follows: “Notice what we’re doing, notice things that we haven’t noticed that we’ve been doing before, notice the difference between what we’re doing and what we think we’re doing, and then see whether we can come up with other ways of either doing the same thing or of noticing and doing it differently. Once you have that kind of awareness in finer and finer ways, you start adjusting and adapting what your responses are in particular situations.” Initiating from the Method’s idea of “learning to learn,” Constable finds that “a safe way of talking to undergraduates is to explain to them that they have certain habits of thinking, reading, writing, and that instead of changing those habits what we are interested in is expanding the options that they have available.”

Cranz, who pioneered the field of body conscious design and has been teaching a body conscious design course since 1989, starts with The Alexander Technique principle of “paying attention to the means whereby.” This principle is opposed to “end gaining, which would be getting the task done at any cost. Architecture students are willing to stay up all night and ruin their metabolism, and we’re all willing to hunch down over things and push our heads forward and do other lousy things for our bodies. How about caring about the quality of the means by which we accomplish things, writing our papers and reading books and speaking? This would mean application at an everyday, every moment basis, not in specialized meditations, poses, postures, anything. So it’s trying to be integrated with life.”

Kuppers is well known for how she engages body-mind practices in scholarly and artistic research that cuts across disability studies and performance studies. She gave us an experience of her somatic teaching method as a form of collaborative political labour. She had us stand up and participate in a centring exercise, swaying forward and back, side to side. As we gently rocked together, she told us a story of teaching community dance classes to mental health system survivors in Wales: “A wonderful group of my fellow people, people with significant experiences of hospitalization. Many of them had been homeless, had been in prison, had had depot medication, and I was a young one. I had Brecht under one arm and Augusto Boal under the other arm, that was my training, I knew what to do. That didn’t really work very well because this is what happened. While we’re doing nicely here, everybody’s swaying, I was doing this in my classes and people would try to sway and they couldn’t stop themselves, they would just fall forward. People were literally not finding centre, people often in situations where they’ve been told there’s no space for you here, or you’ll be put in this box, or you’ll have medication injected under your skin against your will, or you’ll be put in this institution. So given that there was no sense of ownership of one’s body, there was no diaphragm to breathe from, there was no place to find a centre in, we had to come up with somatic practices that enabled us to get to what we would then call community theatre. And that’s become my career now. What I do is sway with people.”

Kuppers offers weekly relaxation sessions in all of her classrooms to help transition students into the space of learning. “Just three to five minutes. Feel where you’re at, keep your feet down if you

feel like it or nicely crossed, or whatever, breathe in and breathe out in your own rhythm, become aware of how gravity falls through you, you don't have to change anything, you're just paying attention. I do this in the main because over the years I've also noticed how scattered most of us are as we enter a classroom. I've found students find it much easier to concentrate on what we're doing after we've done this."

Cranz also regularly includes awareness practices in her body conscious design course: "Every week I teach a different technique for increasing sensory awareness, feet, sitz bones,² shoulders, spine, eyes, on and on, and then we read stuff from history and comparative anthropology about how culture shapes the body, and then we do three design problems: a shoe that is not anatomically harmful but still fashionable—that's a nice contradiction for everyone to work with; then a chair, another contradiction because you really can't design a good right angle chair; and then a room interior that supports the body in at least five or six different postures or, better yet, for sequences of movement."

Without necessarily thematizing it, Constable incorporates embodied awareness training in her undergraduate classes: "In my teaching, it's not that you have feelings, and that's a different project than the practice academically that you're engaged in," Constable said. "I had students in a course on narratives of the self read Kafka's *Letter to his Father*, and I told them to read it twice. 'The first time just read the way you would normally—underline, highlight, and do whatever it is you think you would do. The second time, notice what you didn't do.' One student said, 'But that's not going to be objective since we already know that we're doing it a second time.' So then we had a whole conversation about the difference between subjective and objective, why a student might think that an 'objective' stance should be privileged here, and how one becomes aware of ways of reading. You notice and draw on their immediate feelings, sensations, responses. It's all clustered, the thinking, the doing, the sensing, the feeling."

Lucey offered an example of how certain pedagogical principles from Iyengar yoga might function in a graduate context. After leading us in an extended exercise in attentive awareness that focused on very subtle movements of the foot as it rests against the floor, with breaks in between to notice our state of mind, Lucey explained how he transfers the practice of sequencing that is central to the teaching of Iyengar yoga to his university teaching. Always striving to "find a way to work with the body that is in front of you, you sequentially teach things, so that people can handle the first thing, and then you add the second thing; sequencing within a particular exercise and sequencing from exercise to exercise, so that each exercise builds the capacity to be attentive to what is coming next. There was this one PhD qualifying exam I was on, where I found myself asking questions like, 'If you were going to teach a novel by Jean Genet, and you know that he is difficult to teach, whose novel would you teach before so that the students were able to approach a novel by Genet? And then they give an answer to that question, and you say, 'Ok, great, that gives you one aspect of Genet that they study. What's another aspect and who could you teach so that you could prepare them for another aspect of Genet?' So then you would imagine a syllabus in which you would teach three things first so that you could arrive at something at the end and you would be preparing people's ability to pay attention to something by the way that you structure a syllabus. My colleague said, 'Wow! Do you design syllabi like that?' Well, yes!"

The panel made it clear that somatic principles can imbue academic teaching in ways that address the social. Koppers talked about an African American history walking tour her class took in Ypsilanti, Michigan: "We are trying to pay attention to the fact that we are not only hearing about

African American history in our neighbour village, we are also engaged in the act of walking. We're walking the same paths that people will have walked. We feel what it's like to be outside this particular church, to enter this particular kind of church, where a certain kind of legislation was enacted. We try to pay attention to the formal means with which we are learning. Those sorts of practices are for me the crossover practices. It's not just this very personal journey but it's the crossover between personal practice and social practice. Finding different kinds of cultural attentiveness as to what that might mean is really central to my teaching journey right now." Thinking through how to cope with our emotional responses to current social crises—anti-Blackness and police brutality, gentrification, climate change—Lucey said, "One of those things that can help you tolerate those emotions is to have a technique that can every now and then put your mind in a place of open and attentive awareness. So for me we live in a very fraught moment and these practices are a life raft in that fraught moment. There is this surround that can be quite difficult, and I see every reason to acknowledge but to be able to stand up in it, and I think these practices help us do that."

During the Q&A session, an undergraduate in Berkeley's Department of Theater, Dance, & Performance Studies (TDPS) said, "I've found through somatic exploration and modern dance practice in TDPS I've been able to reclaim my body, it has become a site of vibrancy and not shame. Why is this work so transformational? How can body awareness shift understanding of self and empowerment?" Cranz answered that her design students have had similar responses to her classes in body conscious design, noting that, "They're always trying to copy who's published and look at the masters, and with body conscious design, I'm taking them inside to their own experience and that becomes the basis of authority. Your body becomes the measure of what is useful and comfortable and so forth, your body and some rethought intellectual ideas perhaps in there too." Constable said, "One of the things Feldenkrais teaches is that you learn by variations, and your variations would be things that, if you were judging yourself, you would think were mistakes or errors or failures. But once you stop seeing the differences you are aware of as failures, you're able to grow. I think this is how some somatic practices enable one to transform not only one's self-image, but relations to others and to the world." Koppers added, "I think to my students it's very important that it's not just about ourselves, but the letting go of shame is also about stepping up to take responsibility to change the world that is out there. So you are feeling better in yourself in order to have the basis from which you can begin to change the world." Lucey said, "Shame is one of those things that the world does to you, that people would call a call to order or a call to normativity. And it is experienced bodily; it inscribes itself in the way that you carry yourself. So just the fact that you suddenly start to notice what certain things feel like in your body, means that you notice shame more. One of my great inspirations, Eve Sedgwick, has written a lot about how shame has in itself so much energy that it becomes a generative force, that a deep experience of shame, once you notice it and look at it and feel it in your body, then your body can act out of that energy."

Ayelet Even-Nur, a PhD student in Near Eastern Studies and Ashtanga yoga practitioner, asked the panel about "language usage in the somatic realm vs. the intellectual realm or in the space in between." She elaborated, "In a class where you're teaching someone how to do something physical, sometimes you need to use different types of language. To learn how to do something physically, we need to use language in a certain type of way. So there's a clear interaction between the somatic and linguistic in that setting and I'm wondering how that transfers to here." Both Cranz and Lucey discussed the centrality of direct, precise, and succinct language that has a physical base and avoids abstraction in helping students learn new bodily practices. But Lucey admitted that the sort of language he uses in the yoga studio does not transfer very well to the seminar room and vice versa:

“Mr. Iyengar had very specific ideas of what constitutes direct and effective language. And I think that he’s right that in the yoga classroom there have to be images, words, instructions, but they have to be direct and concise. So it’s not that there’s no complexity, but complexity happens through sentences that are not long but are layered in certain ways. I just accepted a difference that I would be one speaker when I’m teaching yoga and another speaker when I’m in front of a class at the university.”

Constable took the question to be about “how language changes us,” adding, “I think in a way you can do some of the same kind of study of language that you can do of the body. I think that what Michael was saying about attentive awareness, of expanding the possibilities instead of just always going back to the same habits, you can learn yourself in a new way, you can learn the same language in a new way. And what happens when you do that is instead of reading and it becoming rote what you’re reading, it ends up becoming alive to you in the same way.” Earlier in the discussion, Constable noted that her field, Rhetoric, deals with “very specific words like ‘of.’ ‘Of’ can either belong to a subject or an object. So if you think about bodies of knowledge, you can do all of that playing around with what a ‘body of knowledge’ is: a body that belongs to knowledge, the knowledge one has of the body, or, conversely, that knowledge itself is a body.”

Moving the question from how to find the language to teach somatic and intellectual practices to how to “interrogate academic language practices through somatic practices,” Koppers cited the example of having Native Two-Spirit activist Quo-Li Driskill come to her disability culture classroom to teach a Boal class about decolonial methodologies: “I would say zero of the students in the room had any good sense of what the heck that might possibly be about. And they created with him a Boal sculpture that allowed them to get at quite a few interesting things about what that might mean. Our body does know quite a lot about how certain words come to mean. So when we were creating that image together, we got to a quite differentiated place of what decolonial methodologies might mean in relation to disability practices. That was just a really exciting example for me to see how many of us use academic language to influence the shape of the world. We’re using language complexes that need unweaving, that need to stop us in our tracks, that have the agenda to stop us and not let us go past them, to be a roadblock for a while. There’s some use in that, and we can use our embodied knowing to understand the poetics of what these kinds of words are.”

Julian Carter, body worker, dancer, and professor of critical studies at California College of Arts, asked about how to “assess students in classes that centralize embodied practices that produce a range of personal transformations.” Cranz replied, “It’s a measure of success if they just come to class if it’s [a course] about embodiment. I take roll and don’t judge their experiences.” Constable described one assessment method she uses in her course “Language, Truth, and Dialogue.” She places students in groups of three and has them switch the roles of two speakers and a listener. Then she asks them to write down their experiences of being in each role and then has them read each other’s writing. “All that sort of switching around responses, so that you’re not the one always in the position to assess and have them respond to your assessment. They’re getting responses and assessments, and they’re not all going to be the same, but they get patterns and learn things from that.”

Constable continued: “If I’m teaching them, for instance, to write papers, what they need to do in their writing is tap into how they sort of feel and sense already, and then translate that into an appropriate reading and writing practice that shows that they’re thinking about material in effect with their whole sense, with their whole self. But I’m not going through and saying, ‘How do you

feel?’ I can’t grade their feelings. What I’m doing is having them tap into their feelings, which they can do in more or less sophisticated ways.’

Before closing the symposium with another group exercise, Kupperts said, “This social change only ever happens in us who sit together doing this kind of work together. I can see the world changing right now.”

Notes

Special thanks to two somatics teachers, Shelley Senter and Mary Armentrout, who have supported not only my psychophysical health but also my effort to cultivate embodied research practices.

1. All quotations come from my transcription of the video of the panel discussion.
2. The sitz or sitting bones (ischial tuberosity) are the bones of the lower part of the pelvis.

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Symposium Participant Bios

Marianne Constable is a professor of rhetoric at UC Berkeley, where she specializes in legal rhetoric and philosophy. She is especially interested in silence and speech and is currently writing a book on the “new unwritten law” that ostensibly exonerated most women who killed their husbands in Chicago at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. Constable has been a certified Feldenkrais Method® practitioner since 2005.

Galen Cranz integrated sociology, architecture, and the Alexander Technique to write *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body and Design*. She is a professor of architecture at UC Berkeley, a PhD sociologist from the University of Chicago, and since 1990 a certified teacher of the Alexander Technique. Professor Cranz teaches social, cultural, and somatic approaches to architecture and urban design.

Petra Kupperts is a disability culture activist, a community performance artist, and a professor at the University of Michigan. She also teaches on Goddard College’s Low Residency MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts. Kupperts leads The Olimpias, a performance research collective (www.olimpias.org). Kupperts is the author of numerous

Belmar

books, including *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (Routledge, 2003) and *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performance and Contemporary Art* (Minnesota, 2007).

Michael Lucey is a professor of French and comparative literature at UC Berkeley. Professor Lucey specializes in French literature and culture of the 19th and 20th centuries. Having recently completed his fourth book, *Someone*, he is now at work on a new project with the title “Proust, Sociology, Talk, Novels: The Novel Form and Language-in-Use.” A certified Iyengar yoga teacher, he teaches in Berkeley and San Francisco and is also currently the president of the Board of Directors of the Iyengar Yoga National Association of the United States.