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Reflections on Learning through the Body in OD

By Heather Berthoud

FURROW MY BROW in reaction to a suggestion. I don't know why, but as I explore that simple facial expression, I slow down to understand what it means. "Hmm. A furrowed brow? I'm not open, or maybe I'm troubled, or concerned. But about what?" Soon I have the answer and can articulate my concerns.

Two people sit facing away from each other, minimizing their interaction. As they turn their chairs 20 degrees more towards each other, they suddenly experience a relationship that they weren't in before. Now they can see each other. The simple request by the facilitator sets the stage for possible conflict resolution.

In a whole group movement exercise each person has privately chosen two others with whom they must remain equidistant. Even though no one knows who is trying to remain equidistant from whom, participants move in response to one another as they try to keep their "system" in equilibrium. They see that all respond when one person moves. This group was planning significant change to their organization. With this exercise, they saw how any significant change in one area would necessarily entail changes in other parts of the organization. They were then more prepared to discuss and engage systemic change, often referencing the full group movement practice.

In each case, the body is the avenue for learning, whether about self, interpersonal dynamics, or whole group operations. Think about a time that you knew something in your gut before you had words for, or even conscious awareness of, the knowing. Often the body knows before the mind has words, which suggests additional possible interventions and learning modalities that incorporates the physical realm more fully in OD.

Most of the literature I'm aware of discusses learning with the body primarily as a tool for individual development and health. We are admonished to exercise regularly. The benefits of a physical discipline are usually described in terms of individual robustness. Exercise is promoted as a shield against the vicissitudes of organizational life.

CONFERENCE CONNECTION



Heather Berthoud is a presenter at the 2003 OD Network Annual Conference in Portland at the following session:

T309 Learning with the Body: Sustaining Change with Physical Activity
Tuesday, 1:30-4:30pm

While it's true that fitness leads to better physical and emotional health, there is an additional major benefit of physical activity that I want to develop in this article: the use of physical exercise as an integral part of OD. Physical activity can illuminate the dynamics and principles at play within individuals and at all levels of system—interpersonal, group, inter-group, and whole system. I am not talking about requiring significant exertion by participants—no straining or grunting—but the somatic realm offers an additional portal for understanding and changing organizational life. Here is a rich and underutilized avenue for facilitating change and for managing ourselves. This article is a presentation of some initial thoughts, and an invitation to what I hope will be a robust conversation about the possibility of bodily work in OD.

MY BACKGROUND

My own interest in this subject comes from years as a martial artist and witnessing what the arts have done for me and for others. More than mere fitness—though that is not a minor benefit—my study of the martial arts has shaped how I interact with the world. A key focus of the martial arts is developing the skills to engage in life and its challenges more effectively. I've had countless lessons that were directly transferable from the dojang [Korean term for martial arts school] to life. For example, I remember learning a complex kick comprised of two component kicks. I was struggling with it when the instructor said I had to execute the first kick first and fully before going onto the next one. In my hurry to do the combination, I was giving the first technique short shrift. That's right, do the first thing first, then I'll be ready to do the next thing. This is true of kicks, projects, conversations with people, and more.

Besides being an avenue for self-awareness, the martial arts provide opportunities to learn about interaction with other students and, by extension, others beyond the dojang. We learn how to adjust techniques for the strength, reach, and flexibility of the partner of the moment in order to accomplish twin goals of learning for oneself and supporting the learning of the other person. We learn how to give and receive the feedback needed to improve. It's so much easier to engage effectively with people of different skills and experiences in the work world after we've learned to adjust to all manner of variations in the physical world.

In the dojang, at the level of whole group or system, we learn how to perform in unison, staying in touch with each other person in the group through synchronized breathing, peripheral vision, and adjusting our individual movements so the whole can act as one. Each person has a place. We see the application of this in something as simple as the cooperation needed to set up mats for ground fighting or lining up quickly by rank. Beyond the dojang, systems work when each part fulfills its role and maintains its relationship to the other parts. When I understand the goal of an organization I'm in, I can play my role so the system works.

More than having a wonderful personal experience, I have

been intrigued for years with two things:

1. How to make the lessons I've experienced available to people, mainly clients, who are not in the martial arts.
2. How to use the body as a vehicle for learning in the world of work.

THEORY

In pairs, participants deal with a volley of physical movements coming from many directions at a quick pace. Their discoveries about centeredness, wide angle vision, pace, what to block and what to ignore, translate directly to their experience of interpersonal dynamics. Participants not only get a change of pace, a respite from the psychological challenges of the immediate task, but also receive insights on how to deal with the challenges once they return to the cognitive realm. They are then ready to reengage a previously stressful group process.

Participants face each other at arms' length and push against each other, each trying to move through the opposition represented by the other. They feel in their bodies what happens when one side increases its force. The other side increases the level of force to match. If overpowered, the vanquished experiences a humiliation, however small, and so sows the seeds of revenge or further withdrawal. They say to themselves either, "let me try again, I'll show you this time," or, "I give up, it's too much for me." Likewise, when one "opponent" is encouraged to join with the other, they move forward much more easily. With the insight and wisdom of this body work, they are willing to be more creative in developing the force field analysis and coming up with ideas for how to address the hindering forces within their organization for their diversity initiative.

What explains the potency of learning with the body? Piaget's groundbreaking work in cognitive development is instructive. He discovered that learning is initially somatic. That is, before we have language we learn through the direct experience of our body in our surroundings. As children we explore objects and recognize causal connections among them. As we manipulate images and objects spatially, there comes a point when we can appreciate what an object looks like from another's

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perspective. On the basis of these physical experiments we develop theories about how the world works (Gardner, 1983).

Here is early developmental evidence of mind/body integration so readily accepted in other cultures though not so in the West. However, “psychologists in recent years have discerned and stressed a close link between the use of the body and the deployment of other cognitive powers” (Gardner, 1983). My own study of the martial arts suggests that *unity* between mind and body is to be consciously developed and accessed, because it cannot, in fact, be separated. That is, action reflects mental state and vice versa. Think of the difference between something undertaken in a state of hesitation or questioning and one taken with clear expectation of success. Conversely, mental perform-

sion, sharing secular or religious expression, educating, and more (Gardner, 1983). These functions of dance are available whether the dance is participatory or performance. In either case, participants or observers recognize aspects of self-awareness, interaction, and/or system dynamics from their own social world represented by the dance.

Aside from tapping developmentally predisposed learning through the body, movement can work to illuminate situations in the present moment because it may serve as a metaphor for the dynamics that participants experience. As such, it can be much more powerful than a direct discussion. This is because “metaphors are often the medium for understanding and presenting ideas, insights, and intuitions not always available to

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ance—working out tough problems, developing plans, etc.—is best supported by positive physical conditions such as having enough food, sleep, and a comfortable sitting position. The focus of the martial arts (and other disciplines such as yoga) is to consciously cultivate the harmony between mind and body. Action is most efficient and effective when it is clearly directed. In other words, according to a Samurai maxim, to know and to act are one and the same.

At the interpersonal level, it is also possible to conscientiously access and develop “*kinesthesia* — the capacity to act gracefully and to apprehend directly the actions or the dynamic abilities of other people or objects” (Gardner, 1983). At its most basic, this is our ability to mimic and empathize with others. We do this involuntarily. It is why imitative teaching makes sense, and why we learn through doing and not just hearing or seeing.

Further evidence for interpersonal learning in the physical realm is that infants across cultures exhibit the same facial expressions, which are assumed to correlate with specific bodily and brain states. Through discerning these states and the situations in which they arise, we begin to learn about ourselves. Moreover, we learn early to distinguish the meaning of facial expressions of others (Gardner, 1983). Just recall when you last saw a toddler with early language skills remark with concern that another “baby crying.” Later, our social development is learned through the body when, as children, we play different roles, and learn what behaviors evoke what reactions in whom.

Even at the level of complex social systems, we can see the physical as the first door to awareness of the world and an opening for learning in the present. In dance we see a cross-cultural use of the body for a variety of social functions, such as reflecting and validating social organization, providing a social diver-

analytic reasoning and discourse” (Marshak, 1993). Once experienced, the metaphor of the body can be interpreted through a wider experience and theory base. However, the experience itself cannot be argued against in the same way purely hypothetical discourse can.

APPLICATION TO OD

In a group discussion, the facilitator noted that a member was holding herself with her arms wrapped tightly across her chest and clasping her ribs. Was there something she was holding onto that she wanted to share with the group? The participant looked down and saw that, to her own surprise, she was hugging herself. She thought a moment and said, “Yes, there was something she wanted to say.” She then opened her arms and let out her concerns.

Participants are shown a martial arts posture that embodies confidence and are instructed on how to assume it. They are then encouraged to identify a stance that they would usually assume when they feel confident. After a brief discussion, they return to their project with renewed energy. They had been expressing doubts about their ability to carry out a planned and desired project, and their posture—downcast—reflected their misgivings.

In the realms in which OD operates—group dynamics, self-awareness and mastery, goal attainment, social cohesion, process improvement, and more—there may be pre-verbal knowing that can be brought to awareness. At work, people

experience confusion, fear, poor communication, desire for greater effectiveness, or hope for a breakthrough to the next great thing. In all of these cases, change is experienced and expressed in the body as well as the mind. For example, the physical distances participants maintain from each other can express a degree of social cohesion (once other cultural and individual factors are accounted for).

We already use some somatic knowledge in our work. We know, for example, that our bodies reflect our current disposition. So we pay attention to body language as a communicator of a state beyond words. We can say, for example, that a person looks “down” because of a posture that sinks—a slouch, caved in chest, chin down, eyes downwardly cast. While we are cautious not to label or interpret the posture, that we notice it spurs us to explore possible meaning with the person. In other instances, we attend our own body sensations (for example, changes in breathing) as information about the group process and its effect on us.

Despite acknowledging the body language as a reflection of internal state, we tend to view them as immutable. My experience and interest is in how by changing the body, we change attitude and learning. Counselors who suggest that clients exercise during times of stress or depression acknowledge this fact. There is a chemical, cellular shift in the body that changes what we know and how we experience it. Of course, many practitioners already integrate body work in their practices. Still, as a field, we tend to rely on the head and heart as doorways to learning. We can more fully integrate the body into our work as OD practitioners.

We acknowledge the potency of body learning through here-and-now doing such as role plays and simulations. However, somatic experience, that is, bodily movement, as a learning modality in its own right could be further developed. If, as Howard Gardner posits, there are multiple intelligences, including bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, then we better serve our clients and the process of change by making it as easy as possible for them to understand the organizational changes afoot, new skills they will need, and more. For some, the physical is a primary way of learning. For others, whether it is their primary mode or not, they can benefit from the insight they get from learning a new way.

CHALLENGES

A key challenge to incorporating the body as a vehicle for learning is that, as stated earlier, culturally we separate mind and body. My clients tend to value the mind and see the cognitive as the realm in which they should operate. If the affective realm is new to them as an important arena to attend to at work, the somatic is even more removed. When it is acknowledged, it is usually through things like employee wellness programs. Informal acknowledgment may take the form of awe at the person who uses her lunch hour to exercise—and the response is moaning that we should do something like that—someday. In other cases, physical learning for work-related issues is often thought

of as something done far removed from the office in an environment of extreme challenge (think about those retreats when a group has to help all of its members scale a wall). That is different than what I am suggesting. Physical learning can be as simple as a shift in posture or a ten-minute activity designed to illuminate a point.

However, I am acutely aware of the limitations of physical activity that is not immediately interpreted for the benefit of the organizational goal. The connection between the activity and the issue at hand must be directly discussed and applied to the work situation, otherwise people will question the activity's relevance. For while learning with the body may be elemental, perhaps because it is a facility developed early in our lives, and not necessarily nurtured, we may not know what we learned or even *that* we learned unless we debrief the experience fully.

CONCLUSION

According to Joe Hyams, “A dojo [Japanese term for martial arts school] is a miniature cosmos where we make contact with ourselves—our fears, anxieties, reactions, and habits. It is an arena of confined conflict where we confront an opponent who is not an opponent but rather a partner engaged in helping us understand ourselves more fully” (Hyams, 1979).

The study and experience of organizational life can be as much a dojo as an exercise hall. There is no need to sweat, do push-ups, throw hard punches, or do kicks. There's plenty of anxiety and perceived fear to explore in groups or work settings. Our ability to lead others through those challenges, and to navigate our own, depends on an effective use of self. Learning about that self, what it is good at, what it fears, where it gets stuck, and when it flows, can be pursued through a multiplicity of avenues, including the physical. I believe that by using body learning, people can experience directly that which is sometimes a mystery.

As we travel this path, it will be useful to know more about why physical learning works, under what circumstances it is best used with clients, and how it can be designed to have direct and relevant translation to the task at hand. There is much to do and learn. ■

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