

NEW SEEDS FOR A WORLD TO COME

**POLICIES, PRACTICES AND LIVES
IN ADULT EDUCATION AND LEARNING**

10TH ESREA TRIENNIAL CONFERENCE

edited by Laura Formenti, Andrea Galimberti and Gaia Del Negro

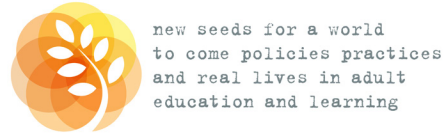
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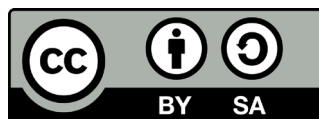
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Lying on Your Back. Awareness through Movement as New Form of Ecojustice Sensitivity

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Abstract - This paper presents autoethnographic reflections about informal research generated with a group of adult participants of Feldenkrais lessons that the author (she) has been conducting online during the coronavirus pandemic. Most of them are women with a background in the humanities and who do, or have done, work in education. In particular, she analyses critically different materials – text, drawing, and photograph – she received from three of them in which they describe the experience of lying down to sense and feel better the connection between mind & body and their broader environments as a new form of ecojustice sensitivity.

KEYWORDS: Autoethnography, embodiment, reflexivity, Feldenkrais Method®.

1. INTRODUCTION

During an aesthetic and embodied experience of Feldenkrais Method®, participants are lying down most of the time. In this way, lying on their back reduces the influence of the external representation of the world and allows learners to pay attention to their body-centered signals (Unwalla, Cadieux, & Shore, 2021). Their body moves as their mind moves. A lesson, called Awareness Through Movement (ATM), is a somatic practice (Hanna, 1970). The pedagogy of Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984), the inventor of the method, is embodied and developed from the first half of the 1900s onward, anticipating current neuroscience research on brain plasticity (Dalla Pergola, 2022). In the last three decades, the Feldenkrais Method has been integrated into performing arts programs in Higher Education (Igweonu, 2019) and it is also being explored by adults in different contexts outside the academy (e.g., gyms, contemporary dance courses, seminar for musicians, studios of somatic practices). Moreover, in the last two years, the practice of the Method¹ online has spread as a strategy of self-care during the coronavirus pandemic.

2. DIARY OF A BODY

In this paragraph I share the circumstance that the circumstances that led me to begin teaching Feldenkrais and how reading a novel inspired some of my reflections on the experience.

2.1. How I started teaching

Just during the pandemic, a series of life circumstances, the main ones being the end of my research grant and the need to make ends meet in a time of global economic crisis, led me to start conducting online cycles of individual and group Feldenkrais Method classes (ATM). I have been a teacher since 2017, but I had not taught online as my main professional activity before then.

The heart of teaching is learning (Feldenkrais, 1990) or rather learning to learn (Bateson, 1973) but it is not easy to describe the practice in words, being a bodily experience that therefore presents a gap between what we tell and the

¹ The terms Feldenkrais®, Feldenkrais Method®, Awareness Through Movement®, are service marked terms of the International Feldenkrais® Federation (IFF) and Feldenkrais professional guilds and associations in many countries. In keeping with academic conventions, they will not be service marked in the entire text as may be required in nonacademic use, but only for the first and most prominent use of the terms. In recognition that these phrases are formal terms referring to specific practices within the Method, and to the Method as a whole, capitalization of all the words in each term has been retained.

sensations and perceptions we experience (Damasio, 1994). The practice teaches how to listen and give voice to the sensitive body, an essential element from which derives the ability to learn, choose, act and be well (Dalla Pergola, 2022). In those months I would make long phone calls to a friend, a literature teacher, telling him about my uncertainties and the first small satisfactions of teaching the Method online. It was he who suggested that I read a novel by Daniel Pennac (2012). In its evocative and literary form, I found a new way to understand the meaning of learning for those who practice the Feldenkrais Method.

2.2. A novel by Pennac

Starting from a not very original idea (pretending that this is a real diary) Pennac sets his novel in a very special place: a human body. In fact, although the protagonist (or rather, the master of the body) lives in France, that is not where the story takes place, but in his teeth, his stomach, his arms, his penis, his legs, and his anus. Trying to discern bodily sensations from mental ones, Pennac isolates the messages that the former gives us trying to free them from the filter of the latter, to deliver to us in the form of the written word the essence of the human body. The diary, set between 1936 and 1987 and given to the protagonist's daughter on the day of his funeral, captures the experiences of her father between the ages of 12 and 64. In the excerpt below, the protagonist is 13 years, 3 months, and 20 days old, and through the experience of teaching his younger brother (Dodo) to blow his nose, he describes unabashedly what it means for every human being raised in the West (we can say in the last two centuries) to learn to be aware of his/her/its own body:

“But he wouldn't blow. [...] Or he wouldn't blow at all, he would blow inside, and it would swell up like a balloon and nothing would come out. At that time, I thought Dodo was dumb. But he wasn't. It's that on one's own body the human being must learn everything, absolutely everything: we learn how to walk, how to blow our nose, how to wash. [...] In the beginning the human being knows nothing. [...] We hear, but we need to learn to listen. We see but need to learn to look. We eat but need to learn to eat meat. [...] Learning means first learning to be masters of our own bodies.” (Pennac, 2012, p. 33, my translation from the Italian version of the novel)

Although we are made to learn, most learning that involves the body remains unconscious. In this sense, Pennac's literary artifice of choosing to have the protagonist of his novel jot down all his sensory experiences attracts our attention and arouses interest because although when we perform an experience through our own senses a trace of it remains within us, this most often remains invisible. We are not aware of it. This is even more true for habits that are obvious. Bringing awareness to the obvious, understanding our dysfunctional actions, and questioning the mutual circular influence of actions or movements, thoughts, feelings, and self-image (Feldenkrais, 2015) are the main goals of the Method. To return to Pennac's example, in a Feldenkrais class it is possible to explore and experiment with how we swallow or how we inhale and experience all actions that are fundamental to learning to blow our nose. As with the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962), for Feldenkrais, “the body provides the access point for mediation between the subjective self and the world” (Baude, 2016, p. 7).

Our bodies and minds are interdependent on the natural environment. But unless we have an education in bodily sensitivity, we cannot realize this. As the novel's protagonist says, we see but don't look; we hear but don't listen; or as activist Greta Thunberg argues, “We are on the edge of a precipice” (tweet, July 21, 2022). Certainly, however, we live in a fragile and complex time (Bainbridge, Formenti & West, 2022), but in order to understand the climate crisis and the social tensions in front of us, we cannot disregard an understanding of the environment around us that is changing so

rapidly. The absence of contact with our bodies coupled with the lack of frequenting nature is leading many of us not to understand, not to get an autonomous, personal, and sensitive idea of what is happening.

In the next paragraphs I will try to tell from my experience and autoethnographic reflections (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015) how practicing the Method, and exploring its basic principles, can bring class participants closer not only to their own bodies but promote the generation of ecojustice sensitivity. I refer an ecojustice approach (Bowers, 2006, 2011, 2012) in Adult Education “to focus on understanding of the ecology of all life systems—including the nature of sustainable communities” (Bowers, 2017 p. 54) for reforming education “within a paradigm that does not colonize other cultures, and that provides an awareness of community-centered traditions that enable people to live less consumer and thus less environmentally destructive lives” (Bowers, 2017, p.54).

3. FEELING SUPPORTED

The Feldenkrais Method is based on the support of the skeleton talking to the nervous system. For not only do our bones hold us upright, protect our internal organs, allow us to move our limbs, and are a storehouse of minerals to make nerves and cells work (calcium and phosphorus), but also every day their spongy inner tissue, the marrow, generates hundreds of billions of blood cells that carry oxygen, fight infection, and clot blood in case of injury. Bones are an exceptional tissue very different from the empty, static Halloween skeleton image we generally have of them. Practicing Feldenkrais means lesson after lesson means reframing the image, we have of them: feeling the hard matrix that gives the skeleton its strength, whereas we generally think of using only muscles to move, but also discovering how bones participate in complex conversations with the rest of our bodies. Although scientists over the past two decades have begun to study the ways in which bones send signals to various organs much remains to be deciphered about how they interpret and respond to molecular messages from other parts of the body (Dance 2022).

From the individual point of view of subjective perceptions, the basic principle of moving slowly promoted through the practice of the Method reverberates in the daily lives of class participants, succeeding in developing a different, and sometimes surprising, way of contacting one's own weight in relation to the environment, others, and the force of gravity. Lying on the ground reduces the pressure of gravity, and it is easier to feel how we move—that is, how we use our skeleton and how we activate our muscles to move. Here is how Flora describes her experience in an email addressed to me last February with the subject line “a little reminder”:

“Dear Silvia,

I am writing to tell you that I am doing a lot of reflecting around your Feldenkrais classes and what I feel is happening to me.

Is it ever possible that, in so few classes, I feel so different? Am I dreaming?

As if I have gained more lightness and softness, but not just in my body, but in my whole being.

I walk and say to myself but look how I can weigh less on the earth. A little bit I "twirl," at my fair age, and I have fun.

I feel like doing things in a hurry, and I tell myself no, come on do it right, calmly, and gently.

I feel tired, and I don't insist on doing, I don't force. I listen to what I hear, and I slow down, rest.

Meekness, care, gentle touch toward myself and others. How beautiful, how delightful.”

(Extract from Flora's email, February 18th, 2022, my translation)

Flora is 66 years old and has a background as an editorial director in a publishing house. She learned about the Method years ago through a trial run with one of her co-workers who was training to be a teacher. In her words, she describes

how she feels and asks herself and me questions. She recounts not only how she feels lighter, that is, supported by a stable internal foundation, but also how the questions asked in lessons continue to move with her in the following days producing unexpected outcomes.

Awareness of one's movements and dialogue with the various parts of one's body – especially the skeleton and nervous system – begins in the participant's learning of this Method and points to when we might support the fundamental need for safety of every living organism. So, working on the ground, unconscious muscle activity calms down and a feeling of lack of fatigue and lightness is created. Once we are standing, this information will transfer by walking to the upright position, allowing force to flow through the entire organism reducing muscle strain and joint wear and tear. Feeling more comfortable on our feet also means we feel more confident, more comfortable in encountering each other and the world around us. It makes us feel more available to encounter as narrated by Flora.

4. IMAGINE YOURSELF

The pandemic and climate crisis are, individually and collectively, changing the way we imagine the future. If during the early acute stages of the coronavirus pandemic thinking about the future seemed impossible now the feeling, at least here in Italy where I live, is that dreaming about the future is increasingly complicated. We have entered the age of great uncertainties, argues the French philosopher, sociologist, anthropologist, Edgar Morin (2020), a scholar of complexity in the humanities. Faced with the danger of a great regressive process linked to the crisis of democracy, the ecological question, and the crisis of globalization, he proposed to change the path we are taking if we wish to cure these ills. In summary, Morin hopes that the planetary crisis of gigantic proportions caused by the coronavirus, which is closely related to the ongoing climate and environmental impacts caused by humans, will be perceived as a symptom, perhaps an extreme one, of the crisis of the current way of thinking and acting, in a word, of the current techno-mechanist paradigm (Morin, 2020), and thus induce a change of course, a paradigm shift. He is aware as few are, thanks to his decades-long association with issues of complexity, that a paradigm shift is a long, difficult process that faces enormous resistance from current structures and mindsets. It is a work that must move the new categories from people's heads to their bellies.

As an adult educator, I try to offer experiences where, starting from the belly i.e., the body, participants can give weight listening and time to a process of knowledge embedded before naming, defining, measuring, and objectifying all the complexity we experience through movement together.

This is the case in my experience with Gemma, a 42-year-old psychotherapist with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (SED), a very rare genetic connective tissue disorder that causes her painful hypermobility in her joints resulting in, for example, daily ankle sprains and difficulty walking or severe migraines. We worked online, in individual lessons, to reduce muscle tension caused by pain and, slowly, create a space and time to be in touch with body sensations in the absence of suffering. Since she could not move the joints without being afraid of getting hurt or causing tension that would generate pain in the following days, I used one of the most original strategies of the Method: embodied imagination (Dalla Pergola 2017). Imagining oneself, enriching and clarifying one's self-image, does not consist in representing oneself as in a photo. It is perceiving oneself and at the same time seeing oneself with the mind's eye. Although we generally associate imagination with a mental event, neuroscience has shown us instead that when we see an object and imagine it, our motor system and all our senses are activated even when we are not moving (Gallese & Guerra, 2015). This also applies to our body: when we imagine we are moving, our nervous and motor systems are activated (Gallese et al., 1996). Therefore, the imagination is a fertile element of learning because it favors the conscious connection between the different sensory channels, the actions, and its purposes. Imagining how we move reduces our efforts and the will to succeed. After a lesson devoted to imagining hand movements by visualizing a flower Gemma related that she clearly felt her hand as a flower and wanted

to draw it. In the following days she sent me via WhatsApp her flower without adding any words (Figure 1). The next lesson she told me that brown represented the support of the earth while the green and blue represented the lightness of feeling part of nature.



Figure 1: Gemma's drawing, January 12th, 2022

5. OCCUPYING SPACE

The Method uses the relationship between posture, volumes, and breath. In some lessons, a lot of space is dedicated to listening and breathing. How we breathe is a matter that is very dear to me because during my PhD I became aware of not being able to breathe fully (Formenti & Luraschi, 2017). The practice of the Method and today the teaching, help me to continue my personal path of softening the chest to let me breathe freely. In fact, it is precisely by listening to the breath that we slowly perceive being supported by the skeleton as told by Flora or we feel the interior and exterior spaces differently as designed by Gemma. But the same experience can also open to another discovery. This is the case with Marina, a mental illness health educator, was advised by a mutual friend to try the Feldenkrais Method to take some time for herself. She is a lively woman; she is just over 50 years old and has extensive professional experience in the field of job inclusion of young people with mental disorders. Right from the start she took part in the lessons and shared with the group her curiosity for the practice that led her to share the floor of the house with her three cats (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Marina's cats are waiting the ATM, April 8th, 2022

Thanks to the mutual friendship, Marina had my phone number and started sharing photos of her cats with me while she was waiting for the lesson. During the course she told me that she had discovered how they too participated in the lessons standing next to her. At the first lesson they were very agitated: they went around her and led them to approach

her face, perhaps to feel if she was breathing. From the second on, they sat next to her. Marina said she felt supported by their presence. They have become masters from which to learn to move as greater agility and elegance.

6. CONCLUSION

Listening to your body moving means talking to it, or to use Pennac's (2012) metaphor, it means writing, through awareness, a diary made up of words and images capable of representing fragments of sensations, emotions, perceptions, and feelings. The experiences I have analyzed in this paper show how the practice of the Feldenkrais Method helped to generate in the three participants greater awareness not only of their own body, but also of the connections with the quality of relationships with other people (Flora), with the surrounding environment (Gemma) and with pets (Marina).

Today we find ourselves in a dramatic situation for the ecosystem, totally unthinkable (Ghosh, 2016) until a few years ago. This increase in cognitive and media awareness about climate change, combined with concern for the future, is generating a growing sense of helplessness and anxiety in people. The practice of the Feldenkrais method, because it is bodily or experienced through the senses, starts instead from a different awareness, and so offers to those who experience it a series of alternative actions.

As the participants in this study show by their text, drawing and photo, their experiences of Feldenkrais suggest that feeling in the body offers the possibility to look for these alternatives, which include the experience of connection with human and non-human others and the surrounding environment. These lay the foundations for the promotion of an ecojustice sensitivity capable of guiding us to change route (Morin, 2020) or to reshape the corporate habits often harmful to the Planet.

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