

Moving (Literally) to Engage Students: Putting the (Physically) Active in Active Learning

William B. Strean
University of Alberta

This paper explores a variety of practices and classroom activities that engage the whole student. Grounded in a somatic perspective (from “soma” meaning the body in its wholeness – the integration of thinking, feeling, and acting), the discussion shows how students can be brought fully into learning through movement, music, and interaction. Examples include: “The Leaders Body: Moving to the Next Level,” which incorporates postures, moving to selected music clips, and working in small groups to learn about five dispositions of the body (determination, openness, flexibility, stability, and centre); “Finding Flow,” which includes an experiential process in groups of five that brings alive the spectrum from boredom to optimal experience to anxiety; and “Building a Humour Body,” which is based on both Reich’s (1960) notions about armoring and the chakra system.

Picture students starting to head-nod in the middle of your class. You wonder what might grab their attention and, perhaps, have them learn. Wouldn’t we all like to engage our students and enhance their learning through active processes? We often seek solutions by considering what we can do to be more entertaining or relevant. One student-centred solution is moving students (literally) by putting the (physically) active in active learning.

The approach advocated in this paper is based on a somatic sensibility – from “soma” meaning the body in its wholeness. We will explore learning experiences that take into account thinking, feeling, acting, and the energy that surrounds us.

Assumptions and Rationale

Two quotations that reflect the perspectives of somatics and physical engagement in learning are: “Book learning tends to stay in the book;” and “Learning is a myth until it is embodied” (Strozzi Heckler, 1993). Another reason for including movement in our classes comes from what we know about attention span in lectures. Various reports (Bligh, 2000; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006; Young, Robinson, & Alberts, 2009) show that when listening to a lecture, attention drops precipitously after 10 to 30 minutes. You may be saying to yourself that neither your students nor you have such a short attention span. Oh, look, a kitty!

Yet some individuals can be distracted.

Some instructors seek to combat attention problems with straight lecture by using discussion. Yet, studies of student participation in such discussions found that in groups of five, the most engaged person contributes 43% but the least engaged member only contributes 7%; in groups of eight, the least engaged five members contribute a mere 3 to 9% (Gibbs, 1992).

Three specific examples from senior undergraduate courses of how students become actively engaged in learning sessions mentally, physically, and emotionally can be found in the next sections. Each of these activities can be completed during one class session (50 minutes is workable; 80 minutes is desirable). These precise examples, though used in a Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, may be applicable to a variety of audiences – and readers are encouraged to apply the general principles to their own domains of practice.

Example One: “The Leader’s Body: Moving to the Next Level”

The premise of this session is that there are five dispositions (determination, openness, stability, flexibility, and centre) that are useful for leaders. When the qualities are limited, it can be a liability. When the qualities exist in excess, it can also be a problem. Using somatic engagement with these dispositions, students can assess their current strengths and weaknesses and see opportunities to develop where they see fit. Departing from the notion that all is cerebral, the position taken is that all (deep) learning involves a structural transformation. The activities are based on the work of Julio Olalla who claims, “Music speaks directly to the emotions. It allows us to be in touch with the pulse of life” (personal communication, October, 2005).

For each of the five dispositions, I lead students through postures, moving to selected music. For example, for determination, we adopt a posture much like a martial artist delivering a forward punch. We then march to “Motivation, Determination” (from a CD you probably have at home, *Run To Cadence With The United States Navy*), walk with

determination to The Proclaimers’s “I’m Gonna Be (500 Miles),” and dance to Marc Anthony’s “I Need to Know.” Students are encouraged to notice if this disposition is familiar and a strength, or if it is more of a “domain of learning.” Students engage in reflection (e.g., “where in my life would this disposition be useful?”) and are then presented with some tips to develop determination (e.g., specific physical exercises). We then progress through each of the remaining dispositions in similar fashion.

After going through the five dispositions, students are invited to move to a location in the room to meet with other students who share their selection of a particular disposition as the one that they most want to develop. They discuss some of their current situations that are limited by the lack of this disposition and they consider what is possible if they enhance this disposition. I also invite students with strength in the particular disposition to share ideas for those who are seeking to expand in it. As a result of participation in this session, students report new practical self-awareness that applies to their personal and professional leadership and communication.

Example Two: Finding Flow

In this learning experience, I present students with basic theory and concepts of Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990), which essentially look at the relationship between challenges and skills. When skills exceed challenges, we experience boredom. When the challenges are greater than our skills, we feel anxious. When skills and challenges are in balance, we have the optimal experience of Flow.

We then discuss some of the components of Flow (e.g., time warps [slow or fast], lost sense of self, intense focus, performance at peak levels, effortlessness, internal satisfaction, regaining a larger sense of self). We then get into the fun of moving (literally) to engage the students in active learning, where classroom learning would often stop. One way students can have a full experience of the range from boredom to Flow to anxiety is by learning to juggle. We can alter the challenge by using scarves or by increasing and decreasing the number of balls being juggled. Another fun and engaging way to demon-

strate and experience this continuum is in an activity with five students. One student is in the centre with one student on each side, one behind, and one facing. A student on one side asks the central student to spell simple words. The student on the other side offers simple addition and subtraction questions. The student behind gives the beginning of poems or songs that need to be completed by the student in the middle. The central student must become a mirror for movements completed by the student facing him/her. We begin by having the four students surrounding the central student provide their challenges one at a time. It becomes evident quickly that only answering simple spelling or arithmetic problems can be boring. We then add one challenge at a time so that the student in the middle is doing one, then two, then three, then four challenges at once. Everyone can see the progressive challenges moving the student from boredom to Flow to anxiety. This can be done first as a (rather entertaining) class demonstration and then with all students working in groups of five so that each student can have the experience of being “it.” This session provides experiential learning about a core concept that can be applied to virtually any teaching/learning domain. Students reflect on both their own experiences as learners and also on how they can structure learning environments as teachers and coaches to reduce boredom and anxiety, while increasing the likelihood of optimal experience.

Example Three: Building a Humour Body

Two different and disparate sets of ideas helped direct me to create this session. Wilhelm Reich, (1960) who was a contemporary of Sigmund Freud, observed that “talk therapy” was effective for many people, but it didn’t seem to work for everyone. He postulated that there was something going on in the body that might be released to help people. Reich noticed that individuals would carry tension in particular areas or bands around the body that he described as “armor.” He asserted that people were protectively walled off from an outer world of painful experiences. This armor would prevent the free flow of energy, and therapeutic methods, he supposed, could help people to give up their emotional armor. Reich proposed that there were seven specific rings of armoring that might

be observed: (a) ocular: forehead, eyes, cheekbones, tear duct glands; (b) oral: lips, chin, throat; (c) neck: when armored, holding back crying, anger; (d) chest; (e) diaphragm; (f) abdominal contractions; and (g) pelvic region. In another of my curiosities about systems of understanding the body, I was moved to explore the chakra system. It seems that many people who are interested in personal growth have heard of the “chakras,” but for many it is just a term or some ideas that are known superficially. The chakras are seven power or energy centers in the body. The state of each reflects the health of a particular area of the body. It reflects your psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Every thought and experience gets filtered through chakra databases. Each event is recorded in your cells – “your biography becomes your biology.” When chakra energy is blocked or misdirected, emotional and physical illness can arise. The seven chakras are named and numbered as follows: (7) Crown; (6) Third Eye; (5) Throat; (4) Heart; (3) Solar Plexus; (2) Sacrum; and (1) Root – Pelvis. When the two ideas of armoring and chakras are placed in juxtaposition, there are clear commonalities.

Not giving myself too big a pat on the back for seeing the connections, I thought there was sufficient basis to use these six or seven areas as a guide to developing movement practices. What I created and present to students is playful movement to music as a way to create a “humour body.”

This little program can be seen as a lighthearted and initial endeavor to begin to let go, release, and lighten up. By asserting the intention to remove or reduce armor or tension, the process can start to unfold. I invite students to journey with me through the body from the perspective that here is a series of suggestions and alternatives and you are encouraged to play, create, alter, develop, and fashion your own individual practices that serve you. We begin with some general warm-up; taking some good breaths, giving ourselves a shake. We then journey through the body.

Students are asked to move to the music, smile, set their intention for the practice, do whatever stretching they wish to do and get ready for the cavalcade of playful moving that lies ahead. We start

with the first chakra – the root/pelvic band of armor. This area of the body is associated with basic safety and is the foundation of our mental and emotional health. The root includes the feet, the legs, and the pelvic area. We begin by connecting to the earth and getting grounded. Music that has deep, relatively slow percussion is helpful. I like “Origins” by Glen Velez from *Rhythms Of The Chakras: Drumming For The Body’s Energy Centers*. We move side to side with legs spread, deliberately stepping alternating feet to the ground. Next, we start the letting go, freeing up, and playfully releasing tension process. We want to get the hips moving and think about letting go of fears and concerns (that may be associated with our basic needs not being met). Some music we use here includes: “Hippy Hippy Shake” by The Swinging Blue Jeans, “My Hips Don’t Lie” by Shakira, and “Shake Shake Shake (Shake Your Booty)” by KC & The Sunshine Band.

We then go through each of the remaining chakras/bands of armor. Space (and the intention of this article) does not allow for exposition of all of the movements and music for the entire body. Interested readers can find a full description of the program in *The HoHo Dojo: Lighten Up and Love Life Laughing* (Strean, 2008).

This whole program probably depends as much on intention and a playful spirit as it does on any particular movements or music. After students have gone through the bands of the body and chakras, an enjoyable way to close is by shaking away any residual tension and armor with their own free-style jam session. They are encouraged to think about anything they have been clinging to that they want to let go. They are asked to consider where they have been protecting themselves, where they can recognize that they are safe and give some muscles a break. We move to the music and let the music move us. We play with different rhythms and movements to feel what gives us the best sense of lightness, freedom, and energy.

This session can achieve a variety of learning outcomes, somewhat depending on the context in which it is applied. For one, students get a deeper understanding of a somatic approach and what it means to work through the body. For many students

in my context, seeing playful and non-traditional ways to release tension through physical movement adds a valuable approach to their repertoire. The activity could also be used strictly in the context of self-awareness and personal development.

Conclusion

These three examples show learning experiences that engage students physically, emotionally, and mentally. I hope that you will consider and explore how these ideas can help you to create similar active learning in your own classes.

References

- Bligh, D.A. (2000). *What’s the use of lectures?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975). *Beyond boredom and anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gibbs, G. (1992). *Discussion with more students: Book 3 of the teaching more students project*. Oxford: Polytechnics & Colleges Funding Council.
- McKeachie, W.J. & Svinicki, M. (2006). *McKeachie’s teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (12th ed.). Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Reich, W. (1960). *Wilhelm Reich: Selected writings an introduction to orgonomy*. New York: Straus & Cudahy.
- Strean, B. (2008). *The HoHo Dojo: Lighten up and love life laughing*. New York: Random HAs.
- Strozzi Heckler, R. (1993). *The anatomy of change*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic.

Young, M.S., Robinson, S., & Alberts, P. (2009). Students pay attention! Combating the vigilance decrement to improve learning during lectures. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 10(1), 41–55.

Biography

William B. Streat is a Professor in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta where his research interests include laughter and humour, somatics, and experiential learning.