

The Practical Application of Body-Mind Centering® (BMC) in Dance Pedagogy

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Summary

Based in bodily awareness, somatic education has many points of relationship with dance education. Body-Mind Centering® (BMC), with some of its roots in Laban Movement Analysis/Bartenieff Fundamentals (LMA/BF), has a particularly easy link to dance. When studying Body-Mind Centering, the theoretical components are often taught through dance improvisation and visualization with applications frequently made to movement and dance. Dancers benefit from the precision and embodied practice of its experiential anatomy. Dance educators can strengthen their organization of dance classes using the neuro-developmental foundations of Body-Mind Centering.

Body-Mind Centering® (BMC), a member organization of the field of Somatic Movement Education and Therapy represented by ISMETA (www.ismeta.org), is an approach to movement re-education and analysis developed by the occupational therapist, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. It is an experiential study based on anatomical, physiological, psychological, and developmental movement principles, leading to an understanding of how the

thoughts and the feelings of the mind are expressed through the body in movement.¹ Body-Mind Centering® states that every part of the body and every physiological system has its own uniquely patterned movement quality and, in some cases, spatial range that we can consciously access.² In BMC, body systems are grouped according to tissues types: skeletal, muscular, nervous, organ, fluid, and glandular. The first three body systems form the “voluntary” system and are the most commonly known and explored anatomical concepts in most dance classes. Attending to the latter three systems brings awareness to the autonomic (“involuntary”) components of the human physiological experience and is a special attribute of BMC, distinguishing it from the other somatic movement education systems.

While trained as an occupational therapist and Certified Laban Movement Analyst, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen is also a trained dancer. She founded Body-Mind Centering in the late 1970s after having worked in the studio of Erik Hawkins in New York. Bainbridge Cohen cites over forty individuals as having influenced her work. This lineage includes The Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, childhood dance teachers, instructors from the Ohio State University Dance Department, Marion Chace (a pioneer in the field of dance therapy), Erik Hawkins, André Bernard and Barbara Clark, Laban protégés Irmgard Bartenieff and Warren Lamb, Dr. Judith Kestenberg, Yogi Ramira (yoga therapist), Professor Cheng Man-ch'ing (“master of t'ai chi, Chinese medicine, poetry and art”), and Haruchika Noguchi (founder of a Japanese style of healing called setai).³ Her experiences in dance and Eastern movement forms are deeply embedded in her development and teaching of Body-Mind Centering.⁴ When Bainbridge

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Cohen teaches, she performs. Her movement is stunning—clearly depicting what she is stating and aesthetically pleasing to watch.

I have been contending for many years that Body-Mind Centering, as well as Bartenieff Fundamentals and Laban Movement Analysis, “have emerged out of the experience of professional dancers and therefore contain a ‘dancer’s logic.’ They are easily translated into dance-specific language and practices.”⁵ In particular, much of the learning of BMC is done through the exploration of movement. Students who are comfortable with dance improvisation have an easy access route to this form of somatic inquiry. Body-Mind Centering[®] has become particularly relevant to dance injury assessment and interventions.⁵ Body-Mind Centering[®] has also been used in the formulation of choreography, the teaching of dance technique and improvisation, and in the development of contemporary dance or “new dance.”^{1,6}

Principles of Body-Mind Centering

The principles of BMC are manifold. They draw on those of motor-development as well as from movement science and somatic education. Examples of the general principles are as follows³:

1. Different physiological systems of the body provide different access routes to different qualities of “mind” and movement.
2. Support precedes movement.
3. Movement development proceeds from being supported (by a caregiver or the floor or crib) to being more autonomous through the various levels of space, for example: quadruped, kneeling, standing, walking, and aerial.
4. Movement can be initiated from any physiological system of the body.
5. Humans are capable of paying attention to (and thereby balancing) their inner and outer functioning.

Additionally, there are principles of BMC that are specific to the various body systems.^{3,7} For example:

1. Skeletal: Counter-rotation (equal but opposite directional action) at the joints clarifies action at the specific target joint, supporting increased range of motion (ROM) at that joint.
2. Organ: By finding the three-dimensional volume of the organs we are able to enhance our skeletal alignment. This is referred to as “the contents supporting the container.”
3. Fluids: Fluids support transformation because fluids are all predominantly water but change substance and quality by virtue of the membranes that they pass through.
4. Muscle: There is a bi-directional nature in pairs of muscles; smaller deeper muscles “current” inward and more superficial and larger

muscles “current” outward.^{7,8}

5. Nervous: The nervous system is balanced by the endocrine system.
6. Glandular: In working with a gland it is important to stimulate or calm its functioning by also involving the glands found above and below it along the body’s vertical axis.

Application of BMC Principles in Dance Pedagogy

A major principle of BMC that has a profound effect on the practice of dance is that of initiation of movement from the different body systems. In practice this involves establishing clear intentions based on accurate anatomical, physiological, and kinesiological knowledge and choosing to express these intentions in movement. Body-Mind Centering[®] (which has its roots in Laban Movement Analysis) contends that as one moves, by varying either movement dynamics or the locus of initiation within the body, one can change mood and thereby touch upon different qualities of movement that underlie different artistic and expressive statements.^{1-3,7} What is being differentiated is the state of mind that calls upon a particular resource in the body that in turn influences the meaning or nature of the action. This process of dancing from experiential anatomy draws heavily on metaphor. However, these metaphors are founded in the real biological sciences.

BMC in the Dance Classroom

For instance, having a different image or intent of where to move from can be applied to kicking the leg, a battement. We can choose to initiate the action from the bones—specifically activating the femur (the thigh bone) and paying attention to the specific sensations in the ilio-femoral (hip) joint (e.g., encouraging the counter-rotation of the ilium and the femur). This is a skeletal image that is expected to bring out the intention of clarity. By placing one’s primary attention on bones, the shape and the form of the action becomes very precise and hence clear. On the other hand, in the same kick (same body part going in the same direction), one’s primary attention could go to activating the iliopsoas and other hip flexor muscles in order to engage power and force and in that way a more assertive feeling. When “initiating” from the intestines, one is deciding to deepen the source of movement to an organic level, allowing more obscured feelings to take over, resulting in a more voluminous, three dimensional action which might be accompanied with a personal association of letting go, surrendering, or resisting as possible examples. In this case, the muscles and bones are obviously still the primary movers, but the style and expression of the leg action is “informed” by this deep organic support. As a final

example, if one chose to allow the sciatic nerve to be the initiator of the movement, an alertness and largeness would come into the entire leg. This is based on the anatomical information that the nerve runs the length of the leg and serves to receive and convey information. In each of these examples it is assumed that all tissues of the body are moving at all times, with the musculoskeletal system being the prime locomotor force. Each action is executed differently in that the different intention elicits either clarity, power, personal emotion, alertness, or a combination of these based on the mover's initiation. Hence the benefits of this approach to dance training are twofold: 1. a ready access to the wide range of the expressive potential which is so necessary to creating dances and keeping them interesting and alive, and 2. a deeper understanding of the body and how to care for it.^{1,5,6,9}

BodyMind Dancing: One System of Teaching BMC Through Dance

My own dance system, BodyMind Dancing[®], is deeply based in BMC and also draws upon, concomitantly, Laban Movement Analysis and Bartenief Fundamentals (LMA/BF), another framework and language for understanding body movement that is taught through a psychophysical training process. The in-depth bodily cues of BMC are sharpened through concepts from LMA/BF such as a thorough use of space, and focus on dynamic variation in rhythms and qualities of movement. BodyMind Dancing has been the subject of research and described in journals and books.^{6,10} Sessions vary in length from 50 to 120 minutes, with weekly or daily meetings dependent on the setting. In studios, people of different skill levels mix, and each finds a personal point of focus based on their own body alignment and exploratory curiosity. The class is most exciting when joined by creative improvisatory accompanists.

BodyMind Dancing's Six Phases

Although the format of this class can vary, the following is a sample class structure I have used. It goes through six phases and is loosely based on a traditional modern dance technique class model.

- Phase I: Information about anatomy, kinesiology, and physiology,
- Phase II: Warm-up,
- Phase III: Floor exercises (includes partner work for kinesthetic and tactile learning aides),
- Phase IV: Center floor and across the floor full-out moving,
- Phase V: Further synthesis of anatomical information into dance (long dance sequence, solo or group improvisation structure), and
- Phase VI: Cool-down and stretch-out inclusive

of non-verbal and verbal sharing about the experience that day with time for questions and comments.

The following is a brief sketch of how learning musculoskeletal kinesiology can occur within the context of a dance class. The BodyMind Dancing class begins with Phase I, which seeks to teach some aspect of anatomy and physiology, and also to explore how that specific body area affects movement dynamics. Phase I is best assisted by showing pictures or models of body parts. For instance, skeletal models and photos that depict the active interaction between the ilium and femur in an ilio-femoral flexion can set the tone of a class that teaches about access to the ilio-femoral joint. Once introduced to the anatomy, we might take time to work in partners (still Phase I) in either quadrupedal or side-lying position, to locate bony landmarks such as the greater trochanters or the ischial tuberosities as points of potential initiation of movement. Some attention could be given to isolating this action from spinal flexion and extension, as leg work often is performed with an over-involvement of the back. Movements would then be explored alternating between the femur being the active mover or the stable support (leg swings or pelvic extensions). Time would be spent with foot brushing to either excite the nerves of the feet or to elicit leg reflexes so that both the core and the distal initiations for leg flexion and extension are being experienced. We would work with the concept of leverage (in this case pushing with the foot off of the floor with a straight leg) to further activate the leg's ability to mobilize the pelvis.³

These movements readily lead to an improvisational warm-up (Phase II) designed to first attune to one-self, and then to gradually increase circulatory rate by introducing the challenges of weight shift and level changes initiated by leg swings or movement of the pelvis (the center of weight). In BodyMind Dancing, class often begins with this warm-up process in the form of a structured improvisation aimed at students getting in touch with the specifics of their bodily needs that day. Specificity of training is an important sports training principle that is duly needed in dance. In addition, dance is a movement form that uses millions of different body actions. No matter how predictable or stylized the dance form, an individual's idiosyncratic movement patterns, postural habits and motivations need to be taken into account in preparing to move. I might then give an alternating leg swing and a pelvic extension-flexion exercise as one of the sequences done on the floor during Phase III.

Phase IV, would include a variation of a longer floor sequence done standing while we focus on maintaining the clarity of action we achieved with our partner's help in Phase I. It would then be elaborated by parts of

the phrase being adapted to a traveling phrase across the floor. This could then lead to Phase V, a long dance improvisation structure that connects the original sequence (involving battements, jumps, moments of balancing on one leg, and turns initiated by twists of the pelvis) with various interactive cues from the music or the other dancers. To further spontaneous interaction there might be the suggestion to touch one another as a signal to change direction or level or to try to elicit reflexes like the flexor withdrawal or the extensor thrust.³

Phase VI, the cool-down, would include a thorough stretching out of the whole body with a focus on the hamstring muscles as they often tighten and strengthen considerably in classes that include repeated ilio-femoral action of the kind described previously. During each phase, except perhaps in Phase I, every other major part of the body would be brought into to active movement to integrate this specific learning with whole body awareness and expression.

Further examples of experiencing tenets of BMC while engaged in a BodyMind Dancing class include:

1. Phase I: Skeletal versus Muscular Initiation. Imagine doing a progressive spinal roll down from a standing position by sequentially letting your bones passively drop with gravity. Now imagine the same action, this time initiating by activating the lengthening muscular contractions of the back surface of the body and rising back up with concentric muscle use of the back surface of the body. The experience is of two very contrasting dynamics and states of mind. Letting the bones fall with gravity's pull is obviously a very passive state, allowing the laws of nature to be a bit more in control than usual. Dancing with an intention to contract the musculature fully manifests as a very active doing, often accompanied by feelings of power, vitality, and strength. Intense muscular initiation is done less in dance than is done in sports, so the quality of the movement may appear as athletic dancing. In experimenting with these images, for clarity's sake, it is helpful for you or your students to take them to their exaggerated limits, singling out one part of the body-mind on which to focus.

2. Phase I: Muscle Balancing. In Body-Mind Centering® it is taught to also pay conscious attention to antagonistic muscle use during movement. For instance, in movement that goes upward against gravity one can consciously exaggerate the lengthening, eccentric action of the antagonistic muscles and what results is lightness, elasticity, and spaciousness. This is of course compatible with much dance training, as dance emphasizes a fairly equal coordination of both concentric and eccentric muscle use for any one movement (e.g., controlling the speed and depth of plies, "using the underside of the leg" in battements,

leaping with full strength while still maintaining an image of lightness and expansiveness).

3. Phase II: Rhythmic Changes by Varying the Type of Fluid Initiation. During the warm-up, pay attention to rhythmic changes through the fluids and be sensitive to the body's physiological need to enhance blood flow throughout the body. Phase II begins with enough low intensity aerobic activity to get the blood circulating to even the deepest musculature. To satisfy this preparatory need, the BodyMind Dancing improvisational warm-up includes both a physiological (aerobic, blood to the muscles) and psychological (attuning with self) component. It can simply come, as examples of a few possibilities among many, from smooth level changes from the floor to standing and back down again supported by a conscious use of breath rhythms; or by large shifts of weight (varied stepping patterns); or by vigorous whole body swinging. With each type of warm-up mentioned above, each student selects her own pace and has some freedom of spatial configuration, thereby personalizing the intensity of action and the body parts that need to be involved. I actively watch the individuals within the class as a further monitoring mechanism.

4. Phase II: Synovial Fluid as an Initiator. Movement that is relatively formless, such as shaking or wiggling can also facilitate a gentle circulating effect in the joints. In these activities, one may be using the fluids of the body as the primary initiator. Of course muscle action is what causes the movement to occur in space. However, the particular subtle coordination and, therefore, quality of the shaking movement is governed by the underlying image, and indeed, the reality of moving the body's fluids, hence increasing synovial flow.

5. Phase III: Applying Neurodevelopmental Concepts. During this part of the class, which includes floor work and level change exercises, it is often appropriate to reinforce those experiences from ontogenetic (childhood) movement history that originally helped us as babies to develop balance and locomotor abilities. For instance, the explorations of the ilio-femoral joint described earlier can be related to neurodevelopmental movement skills (as in rolling, crawling, creeping, and standing up). To continue in Phase III a teacher may then choose to take either of the previously explored themes from Phases I or II (skeletal initiation versus conscious muscular initiation, or the active use of the fluids of the body) to create a whole series of floor or level change sequences that further exemplify these energetic contrasts within the context of progressing from the floor to standing, during which one can also focus on "fluid dynamics."

6. Phase IV: Across the Floor with Fluid Rhythms. Now class moves into more vigorous and large-scale activities. One can get more specific and play with

the rhythm of the arterial pulse as the foundation of the movement impulse (something Anna Halprin has been doing for years). This can be done with large shifts of weight at a quicker pace than earlier in the class or by jumping rhythmically, as in aerobic dance). As a further experiment with the fluids begun earlier, repeat the movement letting the rhythm change to that of the venous blood returning to the heart (as in large waltz-like swinging motions). For further dynamic differentiation and health benefits, one can assist the return of the venous blood to the heart by doing squeezing movements with the fingers and toes. This is helpful since venous circulation does not have the muscular action of the heart to ensure total body circulation. The distal body parts can act as a peripheral pumping mechanism instead.

7. Phase V: Phrases and Improvisation. In Phase V when the intent is to really dance, to prepare the mover for performance, and to feel the full joy of moving, the teacher can decide to let go of all this bodily information and let it become background knowledge for helping a student locate a new skill. Or anatomical imagery can be used during the entire class and then experienced freely through a structured improvisation. As an example of the latter, one can have different dancers choose different biological rhythms (e.g., arterial, venous, lymphatic, cerebral spinal, cellular breath exchange), and then as a whole, or in half groups, the class interacts with these varying rhythms imagining that they are one body with the room as the skin, the outermost membrane.

Kinesthetic Learning is at the Heart of using Body-Mind Centering in Dance Pedagogy

These examples of using an anatomical resource while dancing incorporate the visualization process based on the actual and existent body. This tool of visualizing the soma in order to feel and move from it is now often referred to as somatization.³ Skilled teachers use other sensory modalities along with visual-verbal cues to meet the needs of diverse learners. Somatic work awakens the kinesthetic intelligence (the combination of proprioception, vestibular awareness, and kinetic feedback) and can be done through sound and rhythmic cues together with tactile aide. Tactile aide becomes a highly refined skill through BMC training. To develop other teaching strategies, additional study in dance pedagogy is of course needed. Innovative teachers will also include gustatory and olfactory stimuli from time to time! At Moving On Center we encourage environmental interactions as often as possible and dancing outside is one of the most important vehicles for awakening the sensory and motor aspect of the senses.¹¹ We dance in downtown

Oakland on the streets, on the Art Ship/Peace Boat, or in Jack London Square, and we go on field trips to the Redwood forests or to the National Seashore. In New York City, we find outside venues at different points throughout the seasons. Moving and dancing in varying environments in and outside of school buildings is useful in providing new learning stimuli and in helping children and adults alike find new movement responses. It also helps us to attune more with our environment.

Pedagogical Outcomes

Observable gains for students from the application of BMC to the teaching of dance include: a clearer and sophisticated anatomical awareness and anatomical alignment (with interventions for the prevention or remediation of scoliosis); balanced use of the joints while moving; greater neuromotor coordination (with possible links to improved cognitive functioning); an understanding of the importance of a dynamic relationship with the floor (for yielding, pushing, reaching, and pulling through space); increased expressive range from accessing the use of different body systems; and fewer injuries or swifter recovery from injury. Scholarly investigation of these outcomes is still needed.

Teachers using BMC enjoy having: a huge palette of activities and improvisational structures, a wide range of choices for teaching material, improved observational skills for noting postural as well as movement habits in students, and a philosophy of movement and expression that supports each individual's humanity and supports community building.

Teacher Training

Working with learners of different ages and abilities leads to wonderful challenges for teachers, replete with these questions: how much information is enough, what words are best used, what information keeps the dancing alive versus becoming too technical, and what verbal cues match a student's ability? When teaching dance to children with serious motor and communication impairments, Kim Greenberg, a New York public school teacher, changes her language daily. She no longer says, "Stand up." The whole group has more choice as she shifts her verbal cues to "rise upward using any body part," or "grow upward and change level a little or a lot" "use your breath and belly to get bigger," "press into the earth to feel your strength." Understanding the principles learned in the SOMAction Movement Therapy Training at Moving On Center, a combination of BMC and LMA/BF, supplies her with accurate and descriptive language to meet her goals. In this classroom, everyone is dancing from the inside out.¹²

In order to teach this work, educators ideally study the work with a certified practitioner or teacher and strive to embody the principles themselves before teaching them to others. Teachers are also best prepared to teach this work if they are comfortable with a full range of emotions in students' lives.¹³ BMC both induces a wide range of emotions and provides for emotional expression through the access to different areas of the body. Certification in the work includes psycho-physical skills for supporting different feelings that may emerge in the classroom.^{11,14} In a traditional-style modern dance technique class none of this need be overtly stated; the teacher can simply present movement sequences that require certain rhythms and qualities of movement. However, a teacher may choose to support these movement choices by describing them verbally to the students as well. Many students respond well to metaphors and imagery from nature and life. I have found that there are those students, often kinesthetic learners, who are more able to quickly attune with the task at hand if given concrete access to the tools needed to perform the task—awareness of what part of the body is involved. The decision of whether or not to speak about one's rationale is best made with the overall continuity of the class in mind.

Conclusions

The work of Body-Mind Centering has limitless applications, as it is the study of the human body—a deep and penetrable but vast universe. In my experience, it also fosters communication and community building. There are times when we want to open up our movement range in order to get out of an idiosyncratic rut, to better communicate with others, or to learn and accurately perform the style of a particular teacher or choreographer. Using an understanding of anatomy and physiology is just another access route to finding diversity of expression. Performing in class or on stage with somatic consciousness leads to movement that is expressed accurately. Consequently, this movement can be readily seen and experienced by a viewer, even if interpreted in diverse ways. Sometimes it is the viewer who can most clearly distinguish this clarity of quality or mind. As mover or viewer, one does not need to consciously know all about physiology in order to genuinely experience the dancing, one simply and automatically uses or perceives these physiological systems and their matching dynamics because they are inherent in the movement. Variety of expression directly results from the intention to express diverse aspects of ourselves, including all parts of the body. It is possible to teach all of this, and it is fun to learn it through dance and to dance

using this multiplicity of awareness.

Suggested Reading

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2. Bainbridge Cohen B: *Sensing, Feeling, & Action*. Northampton, MA: Contact Editions, 1993. Articles based on interviews with Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, which cover each facet of her work and much of its philosophy.
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