



## Article

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## Return To The Body: An approach to working with those in disconnect

Lucy Nicholson

### **Abstract**

This article articulates an evolving practice methodology, developed as the writer's worlds of practice and theory have moved into alignment. Reflecting on three key facilitation experiences from her work with participants in disconnect, Nicholson uses practice memories to illustrate the depth and foundation the Laban- Bartenieff Movement System (LBMS) has provided and proposes a facilitative approach when using dance and movement in criminal justice and recovery contexts. The author provides more commonly used language of marginalisation, social exclusion and hard to reach but finds the notion of 'Disconnect', from Self, Other or Environment as a most common place for her participants to find themselves. The article focuses on the themes of

- Movement Analysis and its specific role in this context
- Dynamic Stillness as a place to pursue and Be
- Placing the Observation of Self at the core of practice.

A recurrent idea is that of "returning to the body": promoting a reconnection with self that results from explorations of the body and the space it inhabits in relation to other, rather than a dissection of any reasons that may have brought a participant to a movement session. A fundamental discovery is an evaluation of the facilitator's role, in particular the need to bring oneself into the presence of one's delivery.

As a member of the Dance and Somatic Practice Research Group with UCLanDance at The University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK, I have had the opportunity to write about a meeting point between my practice and recent increased interest in Laban Bartenieff Movement Systems (LBMS). I believe that the theories of Rudolf Laban's Movement Analysis and Irmgard Bartenieff's Fundamentals (LMA / BF) provide a particularly useful lens when working with those who are considered marginalised and/or hard to reach.

This article presents the observations and reflections from journal entries across the last 14 years of working with those individuals. I align these with three key ideas from LBMS:

- Movement Analysis and its specific role in these practice contexts. I discuss this not as a certified movement analyst or therapist but rather as a dance artist making strong connections with movement observations.,

-Dynamic Stillness as a place to pursue and Be, and

-Placing the Observation of Self at the core of one's practice.

I use the term 'considered' when discussing the individuals with whom I work: 'considered' marginalised; or 'considered' hard to reach or socially excluded. The naming of 'other' is never something that I am at ease with; but the need often arises in trying to describe our work for the purposes of dissemination of information or seeking funding. I prefer to note that the commonality of all of the projects I have been involved in is that there is some kind of disconnect: with self, with other, with environment—and my experience is that movement's most precious contribution is in inviting relationship with those things and establishing connection. This is something that both Laban and Bartenieff spoke of often.

Thus, I advocate a return to the body as a starting point for creative practice, not as a stylistic choreographic critique, but rather as a facilitative approach when working with those in an emotionally volatile, potentially unstable and vulnerable place.

In her Inspriees Education Group Webinar, Karen Bradley quotes Laban's famous words as he prepared to flee Germany: 'We carry all we need within ourselves...' (Laban, 1938)

Using the body as a starting point for exploration means finding an individual starting point. Where the unique reasons that brought someone to a dance project, how or if they choose to respond to the emotions or reflections that may arise from participating in the project are a matter of individual discretion. The issue that may have brought someone to movement need not be at the core of the work; movement can be powerful in itself. As Liz Lermann says in *Hiking The Horizontal*, 'When you

make art you do feel better' (2011, 156). I notice that, without exception, the exploration of the body in space, how we choose to express ourselves in it, and with whom we do that is a rich source for transformational reflection. (Larrivee, 2002)

### **Movement Observation**

The following is an excerpt from a practice journal during my time as a lead dance artist with Dance United, as part of the pioneering Academy Programme in Bradford, West Yorkshire. The Academy was an alternative education intensive contemporary dance project for young people within or at risk of being in the criminal justice system. The young people worked with us all day, from 10am – 4pm Monday – Friday for a period of 12 weeks, working towards theatre-based performances and gaining a Trinity college accredited qualification.

*'Crissi came today, I thought we'd lost her; I'm worried about her; I don't think she's slept, her eyes seem ....wide.*

*Everything is so fast, she darts from unbelievable story to unbearable story without breath; her sudden sideways shifts of weight from one foot to another are accompanied by a constant forward and back pulsing; even her gum is chewed with overstimulated tension.*

*Her words glide in a constant flowing stream, in contrast to the seeming discomfort in her body .... everything is just so fast'*

Crissi was a drug addict and a victim of sexual abuse, 16 years old. She was particularly hard to reach because she quite literally never stood still. I tried to try to find her in movement by offering opportunities for her to slow. Laban theory offers the concept of duality: 'The nature of wholeness rests in the balance and integration of dualities' (Studd & Cox 2013,19). Thus, we are not necessarily working with the notion of opposites but rather recognising the 'gradual continuity in constant transition' of movement. (Fernandes, 2015, 82). It was with this concept that I tried to meet Crissi.

A movement analysis allowed me to provide movement invitations and experiences that supported slowing and stilling, working in duality with Crissi's movement preferences. The key to this being effective was allowing the dance to lead; we deaccelerated because the movement demanded it, not because I was simply another voice telling her to stop.

Movement observation is vital in the facilitation process: the ability to succinctly and objectively see the patterns of movement demonstrated by participants through their everyday interactions--how they enter a space, their conversational stance, the way they sit on the floor--provides me with a palette of movement preferences. This then allows me to make several choices: 1) how I place my body as facilitator spatially and dynamically 2) how and when I offer movement challenge (for example, inviting Crissi to move more slowly, affecting her personal rhythm) and 3) deciding when external factors mean further challenge is not appropriate and movement needs to remain more comfortable.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a foundation of The Academy Programme, tells us that we can't expect valuable learning or progress to be made if our most immediate needs are not being met.



(Maslow, 1943)

While Maslow's hierarchy has essential importance for all our national educational systems, it has special weight when working with those who are vulnerable, at risk or in recovery in terms of providing comfort and security. There are times when staying in comfort zones *IS* appropriate, and it is in the subtle recognition of signals of discomfort that allow movement facilitators to make the most valuable choices.

Understanding when I am asking a dancer to work outside of their movement preferences allows me to support their development. It's certainly not possible for me to hold dancers in a constant qualitative or spatial state but being able to acknowledge where challenge may occur and shift my delivery accordingly makes the power of our movement experiences potentially so much more transformative.

### **Dynamic Stillness**

I lead a 'return to the body' workshop for Fallen Angels Dance Theatre, a Chester based dance theatre company who support those in recovery from addiction through dance, performance and creativity. What follows is a capturing of a moment with one member of the group.

*Sorry I can't do this, I need to go,*

*I 'm dealing with everything by myself, it's too much, I need to leave... '*

*Agitation, overwhelm, busyness, speed*

*... We found each other in the middle of an improvisation, I took a step to meet her in a roll up through the spine. We stood side by side, I could feel her impulse to get away I noticed her decision to stay. In stillness and silence we spoke, we parted slowly, calmly, consciously. I heard her take a deep breath, I witnessed her shift in movement quality as her focus returned to self for a moment....*

LBMS uses the term 'dynamic stillness or alignment'; when with Dance United we called it 'Focus'; Andrea Olsen speaks of 'sculpting space in the body, (2014, 214); Bonny Bainbridge Cohen of yielding; (in Olsen, 2014, 6); Dynamic Alignment is the core of Eric Franklin's work; Sara Giddens, our

reader in Choreography at UCLanDance refers to still-ing and dwelling that allows people to put themselves and their experiences into the frame (Giddens, 2015); Valerie Preston-Dunlop refers to 'stillness that is pregnant with motion' (2010, 94) a particularly visceral and effective description for this profound experience. A relationship I notice myself time and again when working with particularly vulnerable people is that moment when the body comes to pause but our relationship with other is heightened, our awareness of self becomes paramount, our occupation of space suddenly expands ....and.... we arrive. Like hummingbirds, we find movement in stillness. Peggy Hackney speaks of 'aliveness', the lively interplay of inner connectivity with outer expressivity' (1998, 214), and it is this connectivity that becomes fundamental in these brief, crucial moments.



The opportunity for slowing and stilling has become the foundation to my work. Placing them in equal relationship, I find the balance in an obvious duality. Fernandes tells us that in dynamic alignment 'there is a readiness to change' (Ehrhardt, in Fernandes, 2015, 92). What Heidegger speaks of as the precursor to reflection, (1978,150), becomes, I think, one of the key reasons movement is the most transformative vehicle when working with those in disconnect. It seems when movement and stillness are seen in relationship to each other, the phenomenological nature of dance can be realised, and we can see most significant change.

I worked with a boy called Dillon in Bradford. In stark contrast to Crissi, he was still...he was slumped, slouched, hunched, held, his focus was down, his chin retracted; everything was in and pulled back to centre like an army in surrender.

He stayed with us for several years as he progressed to our graduating performance company. It was a colleague in the Youth Offending Team that made the most striking observation of Dillon's progression with us: as part of Dillon's ongoing interaction with the service he needed regular photo ID completing. The photos were placed in chronological order around the frame of his computer screen, and like a child's flip book Dylan was seen to unfold; it was likened to a blooming flower, an opening. Dillon was forming relationship to his environment, and I think he had grown to do so not through constant whole-body movement patterns but rather through the moments of dynamic stillness, choreographic choices of suspended moments. Simply being asked to stand still in class had compelled a stronger sense of self, an awareness of that self in relation to other, a powerful and postural balancing through earth to sky and out into space, a place of moving stillness, and an empowering possibility for change.

### **Facilitation**

*Watching Molly tell her story is one of the most powerful things I've ever seen; I must remember...*

- 1. She thought she had nothing to say*
- 2. She was certain this and perhaps I wasn't for her*
- 3. She seemed frail, unnerved and defensive when we started*
- 4. She told me she saw no value in us working with our bodies when we were meant to be writing – she even rolled her eyes when I entered the room*
- 5. She said no....A LOT!*

*I must also remember*

- 1. The unspoken moment I knew I had her trust, how did we arrive at that point?*
- 2. Simplicity is key; returning to feet, pelvis, shoulders, head....and breath*



*feet, pelvis, shoulders, head...and breath*

*feet, pelvis, shoulders, head...and breath*

3. *I must return to my body to be able to serve someone else's.*

4. *I am not always the expert, in fact I hardly ever am...*

5. *Watching Molly tell her story is one of the most powerful things I've ever seen*

*Reading The World* was a socially engaged creative writing and performance project for people in recovery from addiction and mental health issues, ex-offenders and UCLan students. It was produced by Joan Behar and Lynn Shorter from the School of Social Work at The University Of Central Lancashire. My role constantly evolved: something to do with moving bodies in performance, playing with the role of movement in developing creative writing approaches, exploring the role of movement in building a performance group, investigating the role of movement when working with vulnerable adults, questioning the body's role in telling our stories and more. The part of this project that came to intrigue me most was the facilitative approach. I became deeply aware not of the larger strategies, but of the minutia of facilitating, how my body existed in relationship to other.

*Reading The World* was an asset-based project; it used strength based responses to writing and performance rooted in affirmation and encouragement (Aquinas, Gottfredson & Joo, 2012, 105). What struck me about the language used in the pedagogical approach to this project was how that approach inherently sits within an arts-based practice. As Chris Stenton reiterated in his recent article, *Looking To The Future*, as community dance artists we place the people we work with at the heart of our practice, we promote inclusivity and creativity, health and well-being underpin our work. Dance provides a medium to reach people. (2018) The European movement of Social Pedagogy places the building of positive relationship at the centre of its approach. Thempra, the

UK's enterprise for the development of social pedagogy website states, 'it's not so much *what* is done but *how* it is done', (2018) and it is this question of *how* that has become my constant fascination.

When proposing an approach to working with those who may be vulnerable, the style of facilitation or the 'how' becomes crucial. What a LBMS lens offers me as a framework is a return to *my* body in the facilitation of others that best supports my ability to build relationship. The duality of inner/outer connectivity—and as Studd and Cox suggest, 'feeling how they support each other' allows me to find a presence within my own body that invites the possibility of relationship with other.

Finding my feet, asking my breath for support, acknowledging the space I hold within my body, gives me permission to expand out and towards, and gives me the grounding I need to notice how I might best place my body in relationship to other. A conversation becomes a composition. The proximity of our bodies, where I face, the direction of my gestures, the choices I make in terms of effort in my vocal tone, the quality of my demonstration are all choices made through an interplay between my inner and outer awareness; being firmly in my body makes the awareness of the other more possible. My most stressful facilitation experiences have happened when I stepped out of this dynamic flow, getting stuck in an inner perspective: 'They just shouted in my face, I must have done something wrong, I'm rubbish at this' or in the outer perspective, 'Why doesn't *she* get it, I wished she'd just do what I say!' Geese Theatre, one of the UK's leading arts organisations working in the criminal justice system tells us that behind every behaviour there is a positive need. (Bain, Brookes & Mountford, 2002, 20) This concept has brought me through nearly every complex interaction I've had since training with them both personally and professionally, but it has only been since working with a deeper understanding of the inner/outer duality that I've found a way of really embodying that as a value.

At UCLanDance we are all concerned with the subtle interplay between creative practice and facilitation and interested with taking the time to unpick the *how* as well as the *what*.

## In Conclusion

Although sometimes complex, the Laban Bartenieff Movement System has clear application for my work as a dance artist who facilitates across a number of different contexts while always providing a strong somatic perspective. It has helped me to articulate and propose

1. A return to the body as a starting point for creative practice
2. Using the analysis of movement to inform facilitation choices; (to stay with the theory I stick with the word 'analysis' but I'm aware witnessing is becoming a more appropriate term for how I choose to work.)
3. Placing equal value on the role of movement and stillness: encouraging stillness as an opportunity for change
4. Staying in flow between inner and outer connectivity in facilitation; the placing of our participants AND ourselves at the heart of our practice.

One of my key realisations over the years is that there is definitely more than one way: no right way, and no sure-fire way. But if we work ourselves into the approach, understanding who we are, what we bring, what we notice about ourselves in relationship as well as who we're working with and an acknowledgment of their needs, successful projects can be built.

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