

A teacher's testimonial

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What is this testimonial about?

By integrating the student-led discussion of texts about the notion of *Self* with the Experiential Dance practice, I observed how students found it more workable to notice, become aware, and reflect on their deep-seated assumptions and improve critical-analytical thinking. I would like to bring forth my observation as an educator that in times when students are immersed in a continuous stream of mediated experiences (be it through online teaching or social media networking), they are hungry for corporeal, embodied experiences. More than before, embodied learning shows promise to bring innovation to the traditional education system.

What is embodied pedagogy?

Embodied pedagogy departs from the Cartesian legacy of treating the mind as separate and superior to the body. Theoretically, it draws inspiration from the legacy of Dewey and the critical work of Freire. In modern scholarship,

embodied pedagogy stands for fusing critical pedagogy with somatic, bodily, and integrative learning (see for review: Nguyen, & Larson, 2015). Lelwica (2009:125) in an inspiring account on integrating Aikido practice with teaching religious studies, recognizes the following: "conditioned to



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believe that analytical-critical thinking and knowledge acquisition are fundamentally non-corporeal affairs, it is not surprising that many of us feel uncomfortable integrating alternative pathways of knowledge in our pedagogical practices." Indeed, through such presumption, we might be missing on the opportunity to diversify our epistemologies by bringing bodies into the learning process.

A case of embodied pedagogy in interdisciplinary education

Bridging Self and Other: through Mind and Dance was an elective tutorial project in an interdisciplinary seminar at the PPLE college (UvA). The learning goal of the course was defined as training students in transferable soft skills (such as empathy) and enabling critical reflection on individual biases and assumptions. The students were 2nd-year cohort from majors in politics, psychology, economy, and law. Through a combination of thought-provoking readings from Philosophy, Buddhism, and Animal studies, they were invited to

engage with personal but complex ontological questions about their own being (not only theoretical notions but also experiences of *Self*).

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Readings were first discussed in the traditional classroom by fully student-led Socratic Circle¹. The following day students met in a dance studio at the university campus and, through guided visualization and dance improvisation, engaged corporeally, somatically, and spatially with the course readings. At the end of the week, they wrote reflections and engaged in self-reflexivity. As an observation, the average grade of written reflections was 1.5 points higher than in a parallel group, which I taught simultaneously but without embodied learning. I speculate that through engaging the sensory experiences, students received better intellectual stimulation to engage in analytical thinking.

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What led me to consider embodied pedagogy?

It took me years of over-preparation before classes, dozens of hours of late-night-grading, a burnout followed by depression, and almost two years of recovery to realize that the job I loved was in fact, draining and impoverishing me. Being a teacher was not only a job but an essential part of my identity, a thread in the narrative that I told about myself. I went through waves of regret, anger, low self-esteem, guilt, and shame because I reported sick and admit I was not capable of teaching anymore. "If a teacher has not faced herself, then the experience might be like looking in a mirror for the first time, only to be terrified. We are left with our own ignorance and a deep desire to change. It is in the stillness that we allow ourselves to face ourselves" (Irwin, 1999, p. 85).

After facing my limitations and developing ways to cope, I realized the unhealthy balance between the cognitive-analytical work I was performing and my longing for wholesome experiences was at the roots of my burnout. Looking back now, I feel gentle compassion for my old Self, just like I feel tender understanding to students and colleagues who struggle with the way traditional education is organized.

¹ Socratic Circle is a format to organize a fully student-led discussion, which encourages participants to practice careful listening, probing into each other's answers and assumptions, and aiming to understand, as opposed to arguing and persuasion.

Nonetheless, I genuinely feel there is ripe soil for changes, and many professionals worldwide are bringing integrative, wholesome practices into academic education and contributing to establishing new forms of learning alongside traditional education.

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