

The Dance of Critical Pedagogy & Expressive Arts¹

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It was my first day back to work after a yearlong sabbatical to study “Innovative Teaching Methods in Public Health” and I was asked to present my scholarship to faculty and students at San Francisco State University. Heart beating, breath quickening, my body alerted me to the challenge: I could not simply present my research; I would have to embody it.

Artfully paused—feet, legs and hips firmly grounded—connecting with everyone in the room through purposeful eye contact, I slowed my breathing. Standing with knees slightly bent, in a relaxed confident “stance,” I read from my personal mission statement:

I am a courageous compassionate woman concerned about the general disconnection within and between ourselves, the natural world and each other. I value relationships, creative expression, health and social justice. Culture matters to me. I belong to a global community in dignity and human rights. My service is education ~ my work, to facilitate peace through innovative teaching methods that bring the whole body into the classroom. My calling is movement ~ the goal, to unleash the transformative power of critical pedagogy and expressive arts in public health.

Innovative teaching methods in public health means advocating for a sensual language and a practice of education that makes the classroom model the global community we want to be a part of. Thus, the voice and gestures accompanying this *spoken word* presentation intended to show, not just talk about, “embodied leadership.” I wanted my colleagues to see my values creatively connecting with the academic environment and in this way demonstrate how I have expanded my scholarship from critical pedagogy (Chavez et al 2005; Chavez & Soep, 2006) to movement based expressive arts. I wanted them to experience what happens when we move our bodies together, in community, for our own health and that of the planet.

Critical pedagogy emerges from a historical legacy of radical social thought and progressive educational movement that links teaching to democratic principles and transformative social action in the interest of oppressed communities (Darder, 2002, 2003; Shor and Freire, 1993). It is the application of teaching strategies to change hierarchical relationships and establish a healthy setting that fosters open exchange of ideas in the classroom (Giroux, 1983, 1992; McLaren, 1989; hooks, 1994). Complimenting critical pedagogy with expressive arts is appealing because it can create a positive and productive learning experience for the future public health workforce. On a more personal note, movement based expressive arts keeps me healthy and happy as it engages with others, with myself and the environment.

Where is the body in the curriculum?

The seed for my sabbatical topic came a few years back when I taught Women’s

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Health. In addition to adding a multicultural flavor to the course, I offered a 15 minute “stretching” segment and required students to keep a “physical activity journal.” The response was phenomenal! Not surprisingly, SF State students appreciated a class with cultural relevancy; after all, our campus is one of the most diverse and progressive in the nation. What impressed, however, was how quickly students embraced integrating in-class movement. Students commented that sadly, sometimes the only exercise done all week was the 15-minute stretch in class! This experience prompted me to revitalize a course titled, “Promoting Positive Health” with a kinesthetic awareness component. The course focused on college student’s health concerns: mental health, diet, body image, sexual relationships, smoking, alcohol, other drugs and violence. Further, given students tendency towards a sedentary lifestyle my class would have students learn about health beyond the textbook, through their bodies. In this way answering the question: “Where’s the body in the curriculum?” (Shapiro, 1990) and creating *embodied health consciousness*, an entirely new form of practice-based academics.

As a registered yoga teacher, my first impulse was to add a hatha yoga component to the existing curriculum. Yoga asanas (stretching poses) help develop awareness of the inner body and work towards balancing the body’s energy to create more physical and mental ease. Yoga is a complimentary alternative health method and ancient spiritual art/science, that integrates body, breath and mind. A national survey estimates that over 15 million Americans use yoga for both wellness and specific health conditions. (Saper et al, 2004). According to a nationwide government survey released December 2008, approximately 38% of U.S. adults aged 18 years and over use some form of Complimentary Alternative Medicine practices (Barnes et al 2008) and yoga is one of the approaches with significant increases between 2002 and 2007. Given yoga’s popularity and health relevance, I was inspired to build a curriculum around it, that is, until the only room available to teach was a DANCE studio.

Learning I would be teaching in a dance studio awakened my cellular memory. More than a yoga teacher, before being a public health professor, I was a dancer and an artist. The potential of teaching health in a dance space was an opportunity to give students more movement choices, to introduce creativity and include world music in the curriculum. Remembering my passion for dance and the mixed feelings of joy and inadequacy that came from learning dance as performance I looked to Anna Halprin’s vision of dance as a healing and transformative practice. In turn, her work introduced me to the “psychokinetic process” connecting movement, drawing and writing to self-study. A. Halprin asks educators, “in trying to understand the messages our body is giving us, rather than analyzing or interpreting in a cognitive way participants make drawings of the images ... connect these images to movements and feelings/emotions through dance.” (Halprin, 2000 p.26) Further, Anna emphasizes the multicultural element. Dance as a healing art is customary in most cultures worldwide where it is used in community building, ritual and celebration. Dance has a highly integrative nature as it engages all the senses through movement, and expression.

Anna Halprin is a master teacher who views somatic movement-based education as a political act. As such, she has been a major contributor to the empowerment of people from all walks of life. She and her daughter, Daria Halprin founded the Tamalpa Institute, a non-profit internationally recognized school for movement-based expressive arts education and therapy the 70’s. Tamalpa calls their approach the *life/art process*; an approach that integrates movement/dance, visual arts, performance techniques and therapeutic practices. Tamalpa’s

pedagogy is interactive, with a focus on “three levels of awareness:” (1) the body in movement offering sensation, (2) the mind brings imagination, and (3) the emotional level with feelings and connections to stories hidden even from ourselves. Reading Anna and Daria Halprin’s books, taking classes and experiencing two weekend workshops, I was now ready to teach an embodied course in college health titled *Promoting Positive Health*.

Promoting Positive Health

The intention of “Promoting Personal Health” is to introduce students to global perspectives on personal and community health as well as health inequality. Students identify effective strategies for wellness, including: the use of creative arts, physical activity, community building and healthy eating/drinking/consuming, etc. They critically analyze health through three levels of awareness (physical, emotional and mental), discuss sexual health, interpersonal boundaries, communication and relationship issues as well as learn to use expressive arts to heal conflicts and sickness born of oppressive attitudes and behaviors in us and among us. Students study violence as a public health issue and participate in non-violence training. They practice effective cross-cultural communication skills and develop introductory level proficiency in the use of movement, drawing, collage, and creative writing. During the first 4 weeks of the semester students are introduced to broad health topics as well as creative tools for wellness. The next 8 weeks they explore specific personal health topics through body maps, collage, and community events. The last 3 weeks are organized around creativity and sustainability. Students work as teams to develop a *showcase* for promoting positive health. On average, this three-hour class follows the following sequence:

- somatic check-in ~ to become aware of the overall mood of the group.
- sensory awareness ~ to enter the body through personal and group movement.
- topic of the day ~ to explore health from a knowledge base.
- experiential learning ~ to make personal and global connections with the topic.
- embodied closure ~ yoga poses that integrate the material and bring self-reflection.

After teaching the course for three semesters I compiled student’s thoughts, feelings and insights. Students say they have a better understanding of themselves and what it means to be healthy. “I’ve gained a lot of knowledge on health, stress managements skills and relationships. Most importantly reflecting on my own personal health is rewarding.” They point out the complexity involved in developing the “discipline to build my self-esteem, to practice yoga, creativity and focus on my health. I want to stay strong, I want to live.” It is rewarding to learn about the community building aspect of the course, “I think it feels more like a community here because of the way class discussions are, the way we sit in a circle facing each other. We also tend to share very personal stories within our group. I like that we have the opportunity to participate, or not, depending on how we are feeling. We are not forced to do anything that we do not want to do.” Furthermore, students commented on feeling safe: “Because of an acceptance towards each other, there is a willingness to listen and share.” “I feel that it is somewhat of an autonomous zone and safe place to be. I don’t feel judged here and I care about the other students in the class.” “Many people seem comfortable just moving and dancing, talking about relationships or body image and getting to know each other. There are so many friendly people here and I think these components create a stronger class bond.”

Embodied Pedagogy

Given the unprecedented success of the course Promoting Positive Health, when I learned that Tamalpa offered an extensive movement-based expressive arts training, I built my sabbatical around it and from April 2008-May 2009 I completed Levels 1 and 2 training. Tamalpa faculty and students provided a participatory learning environment that integrated theory and practice, honored diversity, and fostered embodied leadership, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication skills. Tamalpa's philosophy that, "connecting with creativity what is inherent in each of us becomes possible" resonates strongly with Paulo Freire's (1970, 1973) theory of emancipatory education, engaging students in identifying themes that elicit social and emotional involvement and therefore high-level motivation to participate. Freire insisted in education where students are working together and finding meaning about the range of subjects in their lives. He advocated against 'banking education' where the teacher makes 'deposits' in the student and opted for pedagogy infused in the arts and culture. In a similar way, Tamalpa training guides participants to access *old* understandings of health and the body with *new* innovative ways of relating to ourselves and each other that can increase community participation, personal transformation and social action.

In her book, *The Expressive Body in Life, Art and Therapy*, Daria Halprin (2003) underscores the relationship between the Life/Art process, community health and social justice. "We live in a world challenged by a widening gap between those with great resources and those with few. Conflict over economic education, racial and religious differences threaten our shared earth and humanity. With technological forms of communication and information increasing exponentially, and the ever-growing ecological waste of our precious national resources, we must ask ourselves *how can we live differently(?)*" (p. 230) D. Halprin suggests the interface of art and healing as a clue. "When so much of our communication and learning occurs through computer technologies, disembodied living seems ever more inevitable. As our technological capacities grow, we are looking for ways to reconnect with our bodies, our creativity and our spirits." (p.230) Echoing African American feminist health activist and writer Audre Lorde's 1984 essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Daria affirms: "Art is as essential to our survival as food, shelter, medicine and the natural environment." (p.230) The integration of body, movement, art and healing are part of an ethical criteria for a sustainable life.

Understanding the body's intelligence to resist and mirror the social body makes embodied pedagogy the next frontier of education. Hui Wilcox(2009), a dancer, woman of color and professor of sociology, has written about embodied pedagogy, drawing attention to bodies as agents of knowledge production. She is developing a theoretical framework that connects embodied knowledge to lived experiences, performance, and bodily intelligence. Her research demonstrates qualitative evidence that embodied pedagogies foster a sense of community and challenge Eurocentric and male-centered systems of knowledge production predicated upon the body/mind binary. She notes that in the civic arena, activists use embodied pedagogies to provide emotional access to science-based information, and to mobilize for social change (Wilcox, 2009).

After my sabbatical year studying movement-based expressive arts, I bring to the classroom not only a set of tools for expanding the creative potential of each of my students, I bring cultural humility – through my own personal experience with the process. My role as a social activist comes most alive when I am teaching in the classroom. Tamalpa helped me

to see the body as it intersects with questions of pedagogy, art and social change. Furthermore, the program taught me see my own body as a dancer and a teacher for who “teaching a subject is not the priority, the priority is to bring out the truth and beauty of each person, as well as in myself” (Otter, 2009). I learned to see *Life as Art* and *art in the everyday* and this perspective shapes a vision of myself in critical, creative and productive ways. Through this vision I can offer my colleagues and students in public health a bridge to an international network of inspired people bringing the arts into the world for growth, healing, communication and collaborative learning.

Post-script

January 2010, I started Level 3 training, a 9-month supervision course conducted online where Tamalpa alumni deepen the embodiment of the Halprin Life/Art Process professionally and personally. A central theme is the transition and translation of this work into life at home and specific professional environments. Looking forward to more and grateful for all the gifts. Please contact me with artful suggestions, tips and questions on the journey vchavez@sfsu.edu.

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