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“I Know Down to My Ribs”: A Study of the Embodied Adult Learning of Creative Writers

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Abstract: This paper reports a narrative analysis on the embodied learning of creative writers, by providing an extended narrative on the embodied learning of one participant. It is theoretically grounded in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the body, Gendlin’s notion of the “felt sense, and Jordi’s analysis of reflection for integrating mind and body.

“I know down to my ribs.” This was a statement written by Dave in his journal while participating in an action research study of the embodied learning of creative writers. Indeed, this is a metaphor for embodied adult learning, and the aim of this paper is to explore how Dave (and the other participants) came to know “down to his ribs” as a result of participating in exercises aimed at connecting embodied learning with creative writing.

Since the new millennium, there has been growing discussion in adult education regarding the body as a site of learning. It began largely with Clark’s (2001) discussion of embodied and narrative approaches to learning where she tells stories of the body’s role relating to narrating experience. Since then, the discussion situates embodied learning largely within experiential learning, sometimes connected to non Western ways of knowing, and as related to learning’s affective, somatic or spiritual domains (Fenwick, 2003; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Merriam & Sek Kim, 2008). Indeed, the body is involved in these ways of knowing, but trying to figure out just how has been the focus of more recent dialogues. Drawing on numerous bodies of literature, Freiler (2008) tries to define embodied learning more clearly for adult education, and notes that some authors discuss embodied learning differently than somatic learning whereas others use the terms interchangeably. More recently, Jordi (2011) did a theoretical analysis of reflection and the body’s role highlighting neuroscience evidence for the integration of mind and body and by drawing on psychologist and philosopher Eugene Gendlin’s (1996) work on the notion of the “felt sense” of knowing within the body, and his *focusing* methodology whereby one focuses on the bodily sensation to see what meaning arises from it. Jordi’s discussion of Gendlin’s work (1996, 2004) in relation to experiential learning by the carrying forward of the felt sense in reflection, offers some further direction to theorizing the role of the body in adult learning. While there’s been much conceptual discussion of embodied learning as evidenced by Lawrence’s (2012) recent *New Directions* volume on the topic, aside from Sodhi and Cohen’s (2012) study of social workers’ embodied knowing there’s been limited published research studies specifically in the field on the topic. Hence, *the purpose of this paper is to discuss aspects of a qualitative action research study that examined creative writers’ experience of body awareness in the writing process.*

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

This study was heavily influenced by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945), whose philosophy of the body intersects with and informs the work of Eugene Gendlin (1996, 2004) referred to earlier. Merleau-Ponty (1945) focuses on the body’s role in perceiving all of

our experience, and in particular on the body as the “pre-reflective” vehicle that gives rise to reflective perception. In this respect, for Merleau-Ponty the body is the knower of the world in its pre-reflective state. Gendlin (2004) extended his concept of felt sense by developing and including the notion of “carrying forward,” which is an implicit knowledge of the body that both refers back to something and brings it forward. He also refers to this as a “zig-zag” process (p. 36). (Merleau-Ponty might refer to this as the relationship between the pre-reflective and the reflective as a spiraling process that moves back and forward where the pre-reflective is the bodily sensation.) For Gendlin, to carry forward we must “use our implicit bodily sense of the whole situation” (p. 131) which the body can feel. Placing this notion into the context with writers, it is the knowing that is implied when choosing the right word; that we somehow know and can get a feel “or felt meaning, felt sense...the implicit demanding” (p. 133). Both Merleau-Ponty’s work and Gendlin’s, along with Jordi’s (2011) consideration of this in relation to reflection in adult education, provides theoretical insight to the role of the body in learning.

Methodology

This study of the embodied learning of creative writers was a qualitative, narrative research study, though there was some component of an action required of the participants in the study to increase their body awareness. Qualitative research generally examines how participants construct meaning (Merriam, 2009); narrative foregrounds the participants’ stories (Reissman, 1993). This qualitative research study had four participants. Criteria called for participants to be 25 years or older; active and practicing published or hobby writers who were currently working on a creative writing project; and writers who have a practice that gives attention to the body or were willing to begin a body awareness activity such as meditation, yoga, exercise, art, or other activity chosen by the individual as part of the study. Participants were interviewed using a narrative interview guide at the beginning of the study. An action plan of greater attention to the role of the body in writing in light of negotiated body awareness exercises to be conducted and written about over the six week period was determined with each participant at the end of the initial interview. Doing the exercises and writing about them, and constituted the action phase of the study. Participant journals over the six week period was a primary form of data collection, as was the final interview with each participant at the end of the study. Data were analyzed using Reissman’s (1993) narrative analysis methodology.

What unfolded through their narratives can be compared to a prism catching sunlight and scattering innumerable rainbows across a room; on the surface each rainbow appears to have the same range of colors, but a closer look reveals intimate variations. Hence in what follows, we first note the overall findings and then present fragments of Dave’s story, and our analysis of it to show how the story of embodied learning unfolds over time,

The Prism and the Rainbow: Overall Findings and Dave’s Story

The themes of findings across all the narratives indicates that all participants had: (a) a history of encouragement in writing; (b) used writing for healing; and (c) an expanded sense of body awareness consciousness that encourages flow. Given space limitations we show how these themes unfold in the narrative of one participant, Dave.

Dave’s Background and Context

At age 57, Dave is a CEO of a private non-profit organization that works toward prevention, intervention, and education about chemical dependencies. During the initial

interview Dave shared that writing and stories have always been a part of his life, shown as he recounts his earliest experiences with writing, citing his father, an avid reader, and his grandmother, who wrote letters that kept his family connected, as early influences on his inclination towards stories. Growing up in a rural setting provided room to roam, fueling his childhood with imagination and love of story that manifested into extensive reading where he would be lost in the story. His first significant experience with writing happened in 7th grade when he published a funny poem in the school newspaper and received support and accolades from his peers. From this point he would write sporadically until recently, in the last few years, he made the decision to move from a hobby writer to giving his work serious attention and time. At the time of the initial interview, Dave indicated that he now writes daily and he continues to work on a book-length work of literary nonfiction, in addition to other works of short stories and more technical writings for work.

Dave's story overall presents an evolution of coming to increased awareness of the body in writing, but from a place that was quite body aware at the outset. As an athlete who has practiced martial arts for over 25 years, though not with recent regularity, he was quite conscious of his body in the sense of physical sensation, discomfort, and proper movements and techniques in his martial arts practice. Initially, he did not consciously connect his body awareness and his martial art to his writing process per se; rather it was part of his pre-reflective awareness (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). But the consciousness of his body and writing evolved and deepened over the duration of this study through more conscious reflection and attention. Throughout the narration below certain words have been italicized to place emphasis on Dave's deepening body awareness relating to the body and his writing.

The Initial Interview

At the initial interview, Dave discussed the way he comes to story as a nagging idea that won't let go, or the appearance of a character who begins "*talking to me and his story needed to be told.*" From this starting point he has no idea where or how the story will go:

I'm completely lost in that experience. I feel connected to the emotions of whoever, whatever I'm writing. *So if I'm writing something that's heart-pounding, my heart will be pounding. If I'm writing something that's incredibly sad, there will be tears in my eyes.*

These strong visceral reactions signal deep connection to his experiences; it speaks to the assertion that writing is a manifestation of embodied experiences, and Dave states,

There are pieces of me in every character in one shape or form...everything I've ever felt, difficult experiences as a child, embarrassing situations, joyful experiences, everything that I've experienced. I find a way to put those feelings into and sometimes the actual experiences, pieces of them are there.

Dave also addressed his awareness of his body in writing when he is specifically writing about what the body does, putting himself through the movements of the characters to accurately get a bodily sense of the action, resulting in better description. In one instance where he was writing a character rolling down a hill and hitting something at the bottom, Dave recounts getting "*down on the floor and rolling and popping up, rolling and popping up, with something right in my face to make sure I really had it in my head.*" In this way, Dave experiences an overlap as to what he knows through his body and what he already knows in his body that he actually uses in his writing. In general, he was quite conscious of his body overall as a vehicle of knowing at the outset, and was vaguely aware of how it connected to his writing.

Body Awareness Activity and the Action Research Process

The Tae Kwon Do (TKD) *hyeong* became the focus of Dave's body awareness practice over the six-week period of the action research. *Hyeong* are forms, a specific sequence of martial arts techniques resembling combat against an imaginary opponent, containing between twenty to fifty or more movements. Practicing allows him to get "super focused and kind of intense" and if he does TKD forms and breathing before writing, he says it translates directly to his writing practice. He wrote in his journal about becoming more tuned in to his characters, his writing rhythm, as he came to "know down to his ribs."

Being more tuned into characters voices. Dave wrote about how doing a number of Tae Kwon Do exercises affected writing his main character in the following journal excerpts written over a two-day period:

Began with breathing exercise and then did two TKD forms, concentrating on breathing throughout. Wrote approx. 2 hrs, did 3 forms, wrote for 1 hr, did 2 forms and wrote for another hour. The writing came easily, but I sensed I was missing something. It's difficult to describe, but it's as if *I was just out of hearing range* of someone trying to tell me something important...like I'm a reporter following the president who is trying to catch a train. I'm catching most of the words but know I'm missing something.

His practice continues with additional focus on breathing. There is a deepening of understanding that came out in his journal the next day:

Same *breathing exercise* as yesterday afternoon followed by two forms, but just finished them at 6:45 a.m. *Feel calm and "smooth" in the sense of how my eyes take things in...grasp and hold what's in my line of sight....objects have a fullness, not flat...they have a relationship to each other, one touching and flowing (almost speaking) to another.* Wrote without interruption until 10:15. Reading over what I wrote, I believe it has *some depth, some honesty. Feels spoken by Juara (my story's narrator), like I really listened to him.* Sit in *ancho*, close eyes and breathe. Fluttering in eyes stops. I sense tightness in lips. Relax them until I feel my pulse in them. Drink water and feel calmer. I wrote for 2 hours. *Maybe Juara wrote for me, I don't know. ...I feel a closeness to Juara's story, a dreamlike sense that I am in it.*

Of course we cannot prove that Dave's experience of writing Juara is directly related to his TKD or his breathing exercises, but Dave experiences it this way. Some 30 years ago, Moffet (1982) discussed how the process of breathing and visualization enabled the meditator to gain access to inner speech or embodied knowledge. Dave also writes in his journal of being "in the zone" and losing awareness, which is being contained in a state of flow. Called "experiential moments" and "full body engagement," by Csikszentmihalyi (1997) flow is an all-consuming, embodied stream of conscious way of engaging the body in an effortless way. In this regard, writing so closely to his characters draws upon his embodied experiences, making the writing more automatic, intuitive, and less focused in thinking.

Greater sense of writing rhythm. Dave also wrote in his journal about how the body awareness exercises seemed to affect the rhythm:

The body awareness exercises keep me "in" the story regardless of what time of the day I am writing, but *in the mornings I am mostly outside of the characters and observant of the whole scene, while in the evenings I am mostly inside that scene's main character looking out.* Both viewpoints are helpful, but it would be nice to have more control over moving from inside to outside of the characters and from wide-angle to close-up views as well.

Dave then writes about needing to use the exercises to be able “*to direct my mind’s ear and all of its other senses to the place in the story where I most need to listen or touch or smell or feel.*”

“Knowing down to my ribs.” Through his body awareness activities, over time Dave found that his body evolved as something like a conduit for knowing, feeling, and sensing his writing in a very intuitive way that led to a new form of knowing that he highlights:

I know down to my ribs what’s important about this scene, what each person feels in the tug of the conflict, how much they’ll fight to hold on, how it feels to be yanked off balance, who is going to give up first...all of it feels right, and I am connected to it, held in the warm mud of it. I let myself feel physically drawn into it to see what part of the story I was being led to. I ended up somewhere unexpected and wrote the scene from an angle I doubt I ever would have considered. It feels right. There was a kind of “hug” that was right for it.

Dave wrote this, specifically about his writing process, this notion of “knowing down to his ribs” —a metaphor of embodiment, that seems to carry forward the story. His body awareness evolution, and the progress of his writing as he sees it demonstrates his advanced simpatico of body and writing process over time.

Dave’s Final Reflections on the Process

In the final interview, Dave reflected on the overall process of what he learned about his writing from participating in these body awareness processes:

I tend to loose contact with the senses that are so important to my writing. Initially in this project, body awareness exercises helped me slow down the mind-racing strategic brain and let the *limbic system take more of a lead in understanding the story.* As I continued, I began to get occasional connections *that linked my body more closely to the particular conflict or relationship I was writing about at that moment.*

He was also asked to provide a brief written reflection to demonstrate his thoughts about participation overall, and what he learned about writing and the body. He notes:

As a young child, maybe four or five years old, *I didn’t merely listen to stories. I felt them.* Santa Claus made my heart pound with anticipation; the flying monkeys made it pound with fear. *Word and body were one.* But time and intellect conspired to divide the two as if each could stand alone, as if Romeo could stand without Juliet. We know one cannot live without the other no matter what tragedy they spawn together.

To write with felt sense is to write within a *union between mind and body* that is at once both necessary and impossible. To write with felt sense is to reach the soul of the conflict. It is to choose neither Romeo nor Juliet but rather to welcome the destiny of Romeo AND Juliet.

Finding new ways to reach into that sense and hold fast to it during my writing has brought me back to the power of the stories that gripped me as a child. My intellect is stronger than it was then, but it lacks depth unless it joins with what moves inside of me. This study has helped me *reconnect my mind and body,* my Romeo and Juliet. That union may prove tragic. Then again, it might produce some damned good stories!

In sum then, with attention to body through meditation and breathing, Dave’s body clearly has an impact if not significant role in his writing process. Yet the connection between body and word is still evolving for Dave. The action research project is complete, but Dave’s process is still evolving, as Dave’s own life story unfolds in the midst of potentially creating some “damned good stories”.

Discussion

The study offers some interesting insights in relation to the embodied learning of creative writers and for adult learning in general, though the study needs to be interpreted with caution. Indeed, getting a handle on how adults learn through the body in any setting in ways they can verbalize with precision is a difficult task; as Merleau-Ponty implies, body knowing is pre-reflective (or un verbalized) and as Gendlin (2004) suggests in his many discussions of the philosophy of the implicit, much of such learning is just that: implicit in the “felt sense.” In drawing on Gendlin’s work in considering its relevance for adult education and reflective practice, Jordi (2011) argues that adult educators need to facilitate “a dialogue between bodily felt experiencing and cognitive formulations” (p. 194). In essence this study did just that: it asked creative writers to become more reflective about their practice of creative writing by asking them to consider the dialogue between their bodily felt sense and their writing. These creative writers did develop a more expansive concept and practice of reflection, by being invited to more consciously listen and attend to the felt sense of their embodied experience, to move from the pre-reflective to the reflective. Studying such processes is indeed complicated, but doing so puts a little more meat on the bones of the largely conceptual discussion of embodied learning in the field of adult education. It tells us a little more of what it might mean “to know down to the ribs.” We leave it to other researchers to put further meat on those bones.

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