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Somatic Knowing and Art Education

Jonathan Matthews

By somatic knowing, I mean something different from, but not exclusive of, what cognitive psychologists refer to as kinesthetic knowing. I mean an experiential knowing that involves sense, percept, and mind/body -- whole organism-- action and reaction -- a knowing, feeling and acting that is independent of distancing, disembodiment, discursive conceptualization. I mean a kind of knowing that is at the heart of the arts and physical culture and is at least as central to daily competence as the analytically discursive, distancing knowing that traditional schools cultivate. In short, I mean the embodied experience of being. This somatic knowing, which I will argue is of central human importance, is largely ignored by our schools, to the significant detriment of our students.

The Problem

Our schools fail many students. A growing number and proportion of students can't even competently read, write, and compute after 10 to 12 years of school. Most of these students first enter school with eager, if frightened, curiosity. They are both buoyed and burdened by the prospect of their uncertain potentials. They bring with them the felt-expectation that this place--this school--will help them to grow into their dreams.

Unfortunately, their hopeful expectations are often dashed. Too many young students find that school conflicts abrasively with who they are and what they need. Beneath this rough and heavy mismatch, these students' curiosity is ground down to tedium and their hopeful expectation pressed into downcast surrender and the habit of failure.

Looking for Solutions

Attempting to solve this problem, educators propose and implement reforms of curriculum, instruction, and school governance. Since nothing is more layered and complex than human understanding, many of these reforms have positive effects on some facets of students' learning. But reforms typically have a finite life and school culture seems to remain remarkably constant in spite of waves of change. It is my belief that one explanation for the high rates of continuing failure is that school reforms are generally alterations of the surface characteristics of an unchanging, underlying approach to human understanding. If the foundation is shaky or incomplete, not even the most elegant changes in the superstructure will yield a sound dwelling.

In my dissertation, I will argue that the dominant, body-denying mentalism of our school culture is an incomplete, shaky foundation for learning. As long as our schools deny students and teachers the full exercise of their sensate bodies, many students will continue to find schools alienating places ill-suited for learning. In this study, I will examine the generally unscrutinized basic assumptions about human understanding and learning that underlie much of what is done in schools. I will argue that these assumptions about learning and knowledge may be valid for particular facets of human understanding, but that the understandings that they specifically support are surprisingly limited -- a narrow band of frequencies that clamors for dominance with the vast scope of possible and necessary human resonance. I will also argue that it is the censorious dominance of this particular model of human knowing that underlies so many students' leaden descent from bright curiosity into tedium, rebellion, failure, and disengagement from school. In order to understand its position of dominance, I will examine the roots of this model within human cultural history. Having made my case against the given, limited model of learning, I will then present an alternative model of human understanding that supports a somatically full range of human knowing, including within its sweep the previously privileged narrow band. I will argue that an education built on this foundation is more likely to lead to fulfillment those students who would have failed within a schooling structured on a foundation of the narrow band. I will search for examples within past or current educational practice that appear to respect this wider conception. And I will imagine what an education built on this foundation might look like and what its consequences might be.

Overlooking the Coming Terrain.

The practice of denying, suppressing, and denigrating the bodily in human culture is, as in all thing human, complex. However, at this point in my investigation, I see these practices as being rooted in four philosophical, psychological, and material orientations: the ontological; the epistemological; the technological --that is, the material culture that reflects the society's dominant ontological and epistemological orientation-- and the soma-psychological.

The Ontological

One possible source for Western culture's ontological disaffection for things bodily grows from one ineluctable fact about bodies: all are subject to disease, decay, and death. Faced with this undeniable truth, several ontologies have nevertheless not regarded the body as negatively as the traditional Western orientation. Ontologies that don't denigrate "the flesh" will serve as potential sources for clues in my attempt to fashion a theory and practice of education that reintegrates the body.

The seeming naturalness, in our culture, of referring to each single person as having/being the separate entities of body and soul/consciousness

probably grows out of the desire to disassociate the personal feeling of being an immortally conscious individual from the observable reality of the fragile mortality of flesh. In my dissertation, I will argue that consciousness is co-extensive with a sentient body -- that it is a process or function of that body. Individuals, therefore, can never have direct personal consciousness of their own bodily nonexistence or death. Always existing within the bounds of a living body, many individuals believe that their consciousness will always live. Ironically, it is because bodily life has been the necessary preexistent and concomitant condition of that consciousness that many people believe or hope that their consciousness will survive their body's demise. This is the sense of immortality that I refer to above. It is this sense of conscious immortality and the fear of bodily death that creates in individuals the need to believe that their real selves, their consciousness or souls, are sustainably independent of their bodies. The disease-prone and inevitably aging body comes to be seen as consciousness's enemy, when -- in fact -- it is its only home.

The Epistemological

Likewise, the distinction of a separate body and mind within each person is supported by the feeling that the corruptible body must be unpollutingly distinct from the intellect. How could the faculty capable of the conventionally-agreed perfection of mathematical, logical reasoning be an absolutely dependent process or function of a coarse and corruptible body? All earthly bodies are subject to sometimes unpredictable alteration and demise. But an equation is forever. An idea is a pure conception. And some mathematical ideas are invariably regular in their forms, able to predict the perfect courses of the stars through the heavens. Those who value mind in distinction from body see mind's province as ideas, while assigning bare sensation and emotions to the province of bodies or, more accurately, what is left over of the body after mind has been excised.

Plato's conceptual distinction of body from mind has had a thorough-going influence on western culture. In his allegory of the cave (Republic, Book 7), ideas are reality and physical forms are mere shadows that these ideas cast. As in my discussion of ontology above, it strikes me that the motive force behind this move is a personal, human discomfort with the exterior physical world's less than consistently, emotionally satisfying nurturance. From the standpoint of the individual, bodily decay, suffering, and death are this world's defects. Denying their reality, Plato's conceptual dualism separated the mind from the body and its corruption. This dualism was later developed and strengthened by Descartes, and its severing power is at the root of western intellectualism. Ironically, Plato's positing of the eidos, the perfect world of ideas, appears to me to be rooted in spiritual-emotional pain, in a bodily rooted pang. That is, in direct contradiction to his thesis, it is the "imperfectly" physical that is the root cause and the ideas that are, in this case, the wishfully "perfect" projections. Contrary to his Republic allegory, I would say that the eidos are the "truer than true" Technicolor images

projected from the somatic world by Plato onto the wall of his painfully real cave. Because of the inevitable "imperfections" of his real somatic experience, Plato artfully creates a perfect world independent of the body. He calls this perfect world of ideas the real and demotes the somatically real world to the status of an imperfect imitation. The reality of suffering creates in humankind a desire for transcendence. The bodily imperfect fulfillment of desire creates in humankind a desire for a perfectly emotion-free world of ideas (logic, mathematics, and objective, positivistic science). In this world, our messily subjective, inevitably decaying, emotionally and physically hungry bodies are denied for the pure, clean, and perfectly rule-governed world of ideas, ideas that are analyzable through the algorithmic manipulation of conventional, logical symbols. Again, the arts' engagement with the bodily-resident world serves to degrade their status, pushing them to a minor spot in a school curriculum that accepts the given, anti-somatic orientation.

The Technological

Technology is the materialization of Plato's (and Descartes) disembodied eidos. It is the transfer of the perfect precision of logical ideas into a nonbody material form. It is the colonization of the realm of the body by the realm of the eidos. When considering this colonization metaphor, I am thinking of the relationship of the so-called first world with the third world. Those in power (the logical, discursive eidos) impose their *Weltanschauung* within a foreign land (the natural, bodily world), in an effort to master that new world. Technology's materialized ideas aim to tame, order, and control the natural, bodily world. My dissertation will examine the effect of modern culture's anti-somatic, technological orientation on art's place in the school curriculum, and it will examine the consequent effect on children's growth and learning.

The Origins and Implications of our Anti-Somatic Culture

An ontology afraid of bodily death and simultaneous loss of individual personal consciousness; an epistemology valuing distinction into otherness and precise logical categorization and manipulation of this objectified world above all else; and a technology that mechanically applies this intellectual predilection in the natural world: these are the three main anti-somatic forces that I have identified in our culture. Though modern westernized culture is becoming somewhat ubiquitous, it is telling to note that in most of the planet's human cultures, prior to western contact, these three anti-somatic features appear to have been far less forceful, if not largely absent. Why could this be? Is it an accident of chance? Is our accomplished technical culture and its anti-somatic bias an accident of a trade-and-empire driven blending of Mediterranean cultures maturing in the belly of a politically unstable medieval Europe?

The Soma-Psychological

Or am I looking too far from the source of our problem's root? Is the denigration of our bodiliness born in something bodily? Is it the culture-shaping residue of some physical act, some bodily moment, some early and deep problem that most of us have had with our bodies, with ourselves as bodily constituted selves? This is the soma-psychological root that I am also considering. Remember, my conception of the body includes the mind. Those conceptions that don't include the mind -- that see the mind as other, separate from the body -- are the dominant misconceptions whose damage-doing I am trying to name and repair. And even though there are cultures which do not consider the earth, plants, and animals as other than themselves, we consider our very own bodies as other than who we are. This relationship of antagonism to our somatic selves is likely at the root of many of our neuroses and the cause of our disengagement from opportunities for learning, for becoming one-with, for deeply, comfortably knowing (in the biblical sense: a presence-for and intimacy-with not unlike the union of committed lovers). Perhaps it is in some deep, soma-psychological soil that the germ of school failure is planted. My study will investigate this possible anti-somatic source as well as the positive role that the somatic integration necessary in artistic creation may play in the repair of this soma-psychological rift.

The Anti-Somatic Foundation of the Schools

Since schools always exist within the context of their surrounding culture, it is no surprise that the schools of a culture that has difficulty dealing with the body would have difficulty dealing with the body themselves. In light of Plato's and Descartes' concern for a bodily-uncontaminated intellectual purity, it is interesting that the earliest education laws of the United States were written by the Puritans (in the 1640's), whose concern was for a bodily-uncontaminated spiritual purity. Even the worst of current public school classrooms are surely an improvement over the stultifying environment of their Puritan roots, but their basic, anti-somatic bias largely remains. All too often, school works like this: Sit in your seat (still your body), learn each subject's facts and/or computational procedures, perform them on command. In this environment, art education can be seen as an idiosyncratic monkey wrench thrown into the predictably functioning school machine.

The Possibilities of Somatic Education

The standard academic curriculum prepares children for more academic curriculum -- a traditionally respected and culturally-specific, valuable aim -- but it leaves many children behind and short-changes even those fortunate enough to cope well with it. The standard curriculum squanders children's potential because it fails to address the universal heart of successful and fulfilling coming-of-age, the root education in corporeal sentience, learning to inhabit our bodies/lives in ease, joy, comfort, attentive

to other bodies and the rest of the signifying environment, interacting creatively, compassionately, competently, in community. It is my contention that schools are falling short of their potential to educate children because they create in the classroom highly artificial learning environments in which the students' bodily needs and resources are ignored and suppressed. As I have outlined above, I credit these somatic suppressions to particular ontological, epistemological, technological, and soma-psychological forces in our culture. These forces are currently operating in our schools, to many children's peril. Though the bulk of my dissertation will be concerned with the philosophical path into and out of anti-somatism, I will conclude my study with a consideration of what and how a soma-respecting school would be. I will propose a break from the Calvinistic, Cartesian, and Mechanistic fetters that have bound education. Rather than accepting the ground-rules of the given science of education, I will propose an aesthetic of education, an education through art (conceiving of art in the broadest sense, including craft and discipline -- and therefore including the sciences). My study will evolve with the help of many of the writers mentioned previously, and with the assistance of others from the fields of philosophy (including Dewey, Cassier, Langer, Read, Whitehead, and Beardsley), cultural criticism (including Barthes, Freire, Feminist critics, and other somatic theorists), psychology (including Freud, Ford, Gardner, Arnheim, and Lacan), and education (including Eisner and other theorists of a more somatically grounded education). With their assistance, I will write a philosophy of education that respects the whole of the sentiently embodied learner.

In addition to mining and refining a wealth of theory, I will also investigate past and present approaches to learning that appear to be more somatically sound (such as apprenticeship, coaching, progressive education, Waldorf education, thematic learning, "hands on" and cooperative learning, and the teaching of the young in non-technological cultures). I will look for educational successes and failures and the theories to make sense of them. From all of these sources I will synthesize and create a philosophy of somatic education, where attentive, thinking-bodies perceive, move, feel, interact, and create; where children learn a bodily-grounded, conscious being, not just an abstracted knowledge-doing or having.