

# **THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD® OF SOMATIC EDUCATION?**

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*This is Yvan's impassioned contribution to the ongoing debate about a number of issues which preoccupy many of us faced with questions addressed here: What is our role and place as Feldenkrais teachers in a changing society? How should we present our work to the general public? Under what name? Within what context? Would the term "SOMATIC EDUCATION" be an appropriate description of our professional intentions and practice?)*

## **TO BEGIN WITH, A FEW HISTORICAL REMARKS AND REFERENCES**

For some time now an interesting debate has been under way in the Feldenkrais community worldwide, in particular in the newsletter of the French association of Feldenkrais practitioners. The main issues are: designation of our work and the kind of context of its presentation, our place in society, and in particular whether the term "Somatic Education" should be adopted as generic.

Use of the word "*somatic*", was initially suggested by the late Thomas Hanna, Feldenkrais practitioner and philosopher, founder and editor of SOMATICS: Magazine-Journal of the Bodily Arts and Sciences. Thomas Hanna published *Somatics* from 1976 until his death in 1997. His book entitled *Somatics* was published in 1988.

In 1986 Hanna defined *Somatics* as:

“the art and science of the inter-relational process between awareness, biological function and the environment, all three factors being understood as a synergetic whole” (*Somatics*, vol. VI no. 1, p. 39).

(Note 1).

This field of *Somatics* includes biofeedback, martial arts, relaxation techniques, yoga, bodily oriented psychotherapies like Reichian bioenergetics, meditation practices, and a variety of other modalities that converge at the body-mind interface, wherever and whatever that is! *Somatic Education* is actually a subset of *Somatics* and should be differentiated from the broader domain of *Somatics*. Nevertheless, Hanna made a very interesting decision. He employed the word soma to mean “the living body” – a meaning that goes back to Hesiod. Obviously at a later point one could refer to the debate between Hesiod and Plato, and then also bring Descartes into the picture. This could help us understand how the mind-body split came about. But that is not my intention here.

Another fact: For many years now the *Feldenkrais Guild of North America*® has been using the expression “The Feldenkrais Method of Somatic Education” in its membership directory, advertisements, and WEB site. Also, in the *Feldigest* edited by Ralph Strauch many postings have been made concerning Somatic Education. Recently, I myself have made such postings in *Feldigest* 99-78 and 99-81. Michael Purcell, ex-president of the *Feldenkrais Guild of North America* and now in charge of the legal issues concerning our profession there has himself made numerous statements on the value and notion of Somatic Education applied to the Feldenkrais Method (in particular in *Feldigest* 99-86).

Still in North America, this time in Québec, Canada, since 1992 the Feldenkrais Association has been a leader in the “Regroupement pour l’éducation somatique”. I don’t wish to hide anything from you, so let me add that I was one of the co-founders of this Regroupement and until 1998 the first president. That family of choice allows us in Québec to establish closer links with practitioners of many methods of Somatic Education: the Alexander Technique, Gerda Alexander’s Eutony, Träger, *La gymnastique holistique* (Louise Ehrenfried), *L’anti-Gymnastique* (Thérèse Bertherat’s approach to kinetic awareness), Body-Mind Centering, Laban-Bartenieff etc. As members of the “Regroupement pour l’éducation somatique” we occupy a place which is both politically recognized and socially significant in the Québec community of alternative and complementary health practitioners. Within the Regroupement, the different associations involved in Somatic Education share the services of a part-time

employee, print a common directory of members, make public presentations and representations, offer shared post-graduate training etc. Finally, in the fall of 2000, the dance department of L'Université du Québec à Montréal will begin a post-graduate diploma in Somatic Education thanks in part to the existence and history of the professional regrouping of somatic educators in Québec.

As for the history of the idea of Somatic Education in the Feldenkrais community, let me remind you that an article entitled “L'éducation somatique : au delà du discours des méthodes” was published as early as 1993 in the *Bulletin de l'APMF*. (The English version, entitled SOMATIC EDUCATION, BEYOND SINGULAR METHODS, was submitted in 1994 to the IFF Journal but for unknown reasons never published). The French version of this article now forms part of the famous “Cahier Jaune”, a compendium of texts selected and published by the APMF itself to present the Feldenkrais Method. If you wish to find out more on some of the roots of Somatic Education, you could have a look at that article. Also published in the APMF bulletin (No. 37, Fall of 1999), an article entitled “SOMATIC EDUCATION AND HEALTH”, which I originally published in 1997 in the *Natural Health Guide* in Québec.

Having clarified the historical record, I will nevertheless take up a number of points especially with regard to the definition of Somatic Education -at the risk of appearing to babble on (to readers who have read these articles).

## **SOME CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING A DESCRIPTION OF OUR WORK**

If Moshe Feldenkrais created a method of something, we have to ask ourselves of what (Note 2)? Body learning? Learning to learn? Body therapy? Work on oneself? The pursuit of consciousness? Development of sensory-motor skills? Movement education? A tool for kinesthetic learning? A support for existential unfolding? But probably none of the above in isolation.

Our choice of definition will have social and political implications, as well as theoretical and practical including financial consequences. The answer to the question of definition should establish our identity, differentiate us to a certain extent from related approaches and at the same time establish contact with a disciplinary field which is bigger than our method as such. To be sure, our method is unique! But we must realize that our objectives and some of our educational strategies and theoretical premises are far from unique (Note 3). Who then are our allies, neighbors, cousins? Or do we prefer splendid isolation? That's an option too...but rather lonely and cold in winter!

I would like us to take time and really define our terms for the sake of the present discussion. We need to reflect on the consequences entailed by our choices. How do those choices affect our image, public relations, and our profession's self-definition? In my opinion any decision we reach in this process of hammering out a professional identity needs to highlight awareness, in the sense of becoming conscious in and of action, and in the environment, not in the self contained sense of the body limited to its surface of the skin. We should also avoid all esoteric connotations. We need to clarify our focus on movement as a revealing and accessing mode to the fully embodied person. And finally, in order to distinguish our work from the various therapies and also stay clear of the different medical models, it must somewhere be stated that we give priority to learning. What would then remain as a possible field of affiliation if we apply the above criteria to the definitions available to us? ...I would suggest – and I know I am repeating myself – Somatic Education.

## **WHAT IS SOMATIC EDUCATION?**

The definition I would like to propose was first elaborated and ultimately adopted with the help of my colleagues in the “Regroupement pour l'éducation somatique” in Quebec as early as 1994.

**SOMATIC EDUCATION is the disciplinary field of a variety of methods concerned with the learning process of the living body (the ‘soma’) as it acquires awareness through movement within the environment.**

The term SOMA refers to the sum total of the body’s subjective lived experience. The soma is the living body experienced at the first person, as an “I”, both sensitive to himself or herself, and capable of perception— some would say “construction”— of an outside world. Talking about soma does not mean setting body against psyche, nor pitting the ‘soma’ against psychology as in the expression “psychosomatic”. When we speak of soma, we see the individual as a being fully integrated into its phenomenological and biological existence. By working with this somatic perspective we acknowledge that our thoughts (even the most abstract ones), our emotions, and fantasies are all manifestations of the indivisible totality of our biological and neurological processes. From the somatic point of view, consciousness itself is a characteristic feature of life and essential to the very mechanisms of self-regulation distinguishing all living systems. In short, far from being reductionist or materialistic, a somatic approach treats the living “embodied” person in an integrative way. (This is precisely what some of our colleagues call the “embodiment of life”, an expression increasingly used by English speaking authors everywhere.)

The methods of somatic education are defined in terms of the following four central aspects:

- learning (and not therapy)
- awareness of the living and sensing body (and not the body-as-object seen from outside)
- movement (and not posture or structure)
- space or, alternatively, environment (and not a shallow version of self-absorption).

Let us briefly comment on each of these terms.

1) The word MOVEMENT refers to displacement within the gravitational field and in space. One might therefore look at anatomy, physiology, kinesiology, biomechanics, ergonomics, as well as neurology and neuropsychology. In somatic education, however, one would also make quite sure of approaching the living body from a phenomenological or “first person” perspective, in other words from the subjective point of view of the individual “I”. It is one thing to know the names of the bones and the points of insertion of the muscles. To sense and understand movement from within is probably something quite different, for we learn to roll, jump, walk without any knowledge of the fact that we have muscles! Hence the importance of educational strategies based on experience.

It is undeniable that movement constitutes the very foundation of life, and is at least the most essential ingredient in the development of the brain, and the clearest indicator of the state of the whole nervous system.

2) The word AWARENESS refers to the skill with which living systems regulate their behavior in response to the feedback produced by their own actions. What is meant here is the capacity to sense, feel, and also to think, specifically in the context of and with regard to action. We will therefore treat awareness as a biological phenomenon and thus join the contemporary current in the West which rediscovered consciousness during the past fifteen years as a subject of study, discussion, and research even in the sciences. (See for instance the “Journal of Consciousness Studies”, the French publication “Science et Conscience”, or the latest book by Antonio Damasio entitled “The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness”). Consciousness no longer falls solely within the competence of specialists in matters of soul, spirit, and mind. Without entering into discussion of which is which, consciousness and awareness are now studied as phenomena of life itself. At least by some of us!

3) The term LEARNING highlights the innate capacity of living systems to develop and continue to evolve, creating more reliable neural connections and thereby obtaining more mature forms of self-regulation. This is called somatic learning. The methods of somatic education promote such learning employing movement, guided either verbally or through touch, in groups or individual lessons.

By choosing a learning paradigm, the methods of somatic education distinguish themselves from the majority of other somatic approaches geared towards therapy, whether from the psycho-therapeutic or physio-therapeutic point of view. By adopting the term “therapy” and the “therapeutic” paradigm one adheres to notions derived from pathology and the medical model and is therefore interested in symptoms and their causes, and in the treatment of injuries and traumatism. On the other hand, by seeking to improve self-regulation and learning strategies (learning to learn), by laying emphasis on the individual’s capacity for taking responsibility, the methods of Somatic Education demonstrate that they are interested in facilitating healing and also in improving artistic and athletic and all forms of performance. Education and the quality of life in general are thus essentially correlated.

4) Finally, the word SPACE (or if you prefer the word ENVIRONMENT) places the living body in its proper context, where there are other humans, other societies and cultures, other species, or objects constituting a potential extension of the self. Somatic Education can be at the basis of

our connection to the environment and to environmental awareness. Once we recognize the importance of our milieu of life, it becomes possible to leave behind a vision restricted to the limited self which stops at the surface of the skin, and dispel the rather widespread misunderstanding of Somatic Education as a form of navel gazing! Somatic Education is interested in soma and “embodiment” but, primarily, as the basis of perception and consciousness, as that which underpins our actions in a living world intimately linked to the living body. By recognizing the significance of the environment in the equation of Somatic education we also concede a preeminent place to the processes of socialization: a person’s particular body-image, the very shape their living body grows into, does not emerge in a vacuum but unavoidably within families and societies. Their influence forms this soma and regulates its interactions. Our professional field extends that far.

### **BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION**

Believe it or not, I really don’t have any absolute preference concerning an answer to the question of how to frame our professional identity in words. I see this as an open, constantly shifting issue. However, it is my conviction that we will never make real waves anywhere so long as we continue using the word ‘Feldenkrais’ on its own. Public, and particularly academic, institutions would probably never open a department or study center named after the founder of anthropology or the first man to promote mechanical engineering. Furthermore, I would find it politically expedient and professionally stimulating if we could reach an international consensus on the definition of our work. Of course such general agreement is not absolutely necessary and I really don’t have any vested interest in the expression SOMATIC EDUCATION being the “winner” or in the definition I propose here being adopted. We are not involved in a battle of words here, or a power struggle between cultures and languages. It is more a matter of finding an apt expression to describe the wonderful work that inspires and brings us together – first and foremost for our own sake, but also to promote this work more effectively in the society to which we happen to belong. Since this work has so much to offer and our social environments are so different and differentiated, the words may continue to elude us for a while before we come up with a consensus. Nevertheless I dearly wish that this consensus will come about. Let us hope that what has been felt and practiced for a long time can eventually be described clearly, that the appropriate words finally come to us - progressively and in tune with our true intentions. May the debate continue.

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Note 1. The concept of learning did not seem central to the definition of *Somatics.*, while “learning” will be central to Somatic Education.

Note 2. In the current debate around trademarks, we are regularly reminded that the word *Feldenkrais®* should be used as a qualifier not as a noun. Actually all our trademarks are registered qualities, not substantives. This seems to me like another reason to define the *Feldenkrais Method* in the broader context of what might be an exact generic term that we need and have: Somatic Education.

Note 3. One of the main insights that emerged in the early days of a rapprochement between the various methods of Somatic Education in Québec was that the language to describe our various methods and to present them to the public, had very little distinctions to offer, even though there are some deeper differences in the pedagogies and in some of the objectives of the methods. But frankly, at first and second glance, there are seemingly more similarities than differences to be recognized, thus leaving a common territory to be shared.