

Towards a constructive interaction between Somatic education and introspective verbalisation

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1. Introduction

Somatic practices can contribute to the development of a deeper sense of self, through an attention to and awareness of our lived experiences, actions, and sensations (Hanna 1987). In dance education, we have seen that somatic practices can have positive effects on a dancer's level of self-awareness, and can contribute to improving the quality of any learning process (Fortin 1996). But while somatic approaches emphasise the importance of the body in the concept of self, pioneer educator Thomas Hannah (1995) argued that language also played a key role in one's ability to achieve a fuller state of consciousness, underlining the intrinsic links between what he called “sarcal experience” and “lingual experience”.

In order for an individual to develop fully this “sarcal experience”, bodily experiences, which might be understood at a pre-linguistic level, must be put into words. As Piaget (1948) and Vygostky (1967) have argued, language and verbal evocation are cognitive tools that can be used to learn new artistic or physical skills – be it the altering of perceptions, a memorising task, or another type of problem solving. Indeed, in somatic education settings, participants are often encouraged to speak from their movement explorations in order to develop a consciousness of their bodily practices and an awareness of their movement patterns (Adler 2003, Kirsch et al. 2009, Grove et al. 2005, Opacic et al. 2009, Bacon 2012). For example, Martha Eddy (2009) explains that she dedicates the last part of her somatic education sessions to a time of “non-verbal and verbal sharing about the experience that day with time for questions and comments” (p.88). Similarly, Erskine (2009) describes moments of exchange during somatic explorations when students “were asked questions and their own questions were welcomed, they were encouraged to respond with their own thoughts and to the views of others” (p.6). Bacon (2012) asserts that these verbalisations are “both difficult and imperative” (p.118), proposing that somatic educators must develop strategies that facilitate the “discovery and development of language that emerges uniquely *from* the experience of being a moving, perceiving body rather than *about* that experience” (p.116, original emphasis). Similarly, Smears (2005) notes that somatic educators must be aware that these exchanges may at times be “disturbing” to participants, since “giving language to unknown experience requires intention, patience: attention to the subtleties of the lived body and deference to being open to chaos” (p.107).

And yet, while students are encouraged to reflect on their embodied experiences during or after somatic education lessons, little empirical research has been conducted on the way in which their verbalisations are formulated, or on the techniques employed by educators to solicit such verbalisations. Since these moments of exchange or verbalisation are often self-guided, and there is no standardised system as to how they should be formulated, some students might find it difficult to assess whether or not they have achieved a veritable “transformation from the bodily experience into language” (Bacon, 2012, p.118). Moreover, as

somatic educators, we do not perhaps always evaluate the influence our own choice of words might have on our students' verbalisations of bodily experiences. However, Austin (1970) has noted the “perlocutionary effects of discourse” meaning that the verbalisations of a given speaker will necessarily influence the behaviour and responses of those who bear witness to them. This considered, it seems necessary to consider not only how our students verbalise their experiences, but also how we as educators speak with and guide participants in our somatic education classes, and seek the most appropriate means to assist them.

In the field of psychology, there exists an interview technique called the “explicitation interview”. Developed by French researcher (CNRS) Pierre Vermersch (2000, 2012, 1999), this technique proposes an approach to soliciting *a posteriori* introspective verbalisations of performed actions, be they physical, perceptive, or mental. Vermersch argues that this process can help individuals gain access to their subjective lived experience. Since somatic education and explicitation interview techniques share a common phenomenological base, they both place value on the subjective nature of reality and encourage individuals to plunge into their own concrete lived experiences to gain a deeper awareness of practice.

As dance researchers and somatic educators trained in explicitation interview techniques, we decided to lead a workshop at the *Dance and Somatic Practices Conference* at the University of Coventry in July 2013, which combined a somatic exploration with an exercise in introspective verbalisation. In this chapter, we present some of the major themes that were explored in this workshop. We begin by outlining the key principles of a French movement analysis approach known as Functional Analysis of the Dancing Body (*Analyse Fonctionnelle du Corps dans le Mouvement Dansé*, or *AFCMD*), which informed the explorations we undertook through the workshop. Next, we present the explicitation interview techniques, and discuss the reasoning behind our choice of this approach. Having explored the theoretical dimensions of both approaches, we then discuss how we brought these two methods together in practice by reviewing the somatic explorations conducted in our workshop, and drawing examples from explicitation interviews conducted with three participants following the workshop. Finally, we conclude the chapter by highlighting the need for further investigation into the modes of verbalisation in the fields of somatic education and dance studies, arguing that the interview techniques proposed by Vermersch's approach to retrospective introspection may prove to be highly effective in movement and practice based research.

2. An Introduction to the principles of Functional Analysis of the Dancing Body (*Analyse Fonctionnelle du Corps dans le Mouvement Dansé* or *AFCMD*)

The somatic education lessons offered during our workshop were inspired by a French system of movement analysis called Functional Analysis of the Dancing Body (*Analyse Fonctionnelle du Corps dans le Mouvement Dansé* in French, or *AFCMD*). AFCMD is an approach to movement observation and practice that has developed in France since the late 1980s, when the French government introduced a national diploma programme to train dance teachers, in which dance kinaesiology was to play an essential role (Cazemajou 2005). The dance kinaesiology programme itself – which was initiated by Odile Rouquet and carried out by her colleague Hubert Godard – was tailored to give dance educators an integrated training in both somatics and movement sciences, all while

bearing in mind how these related to artistic expression in movement (Schulmann 1999). The curriculum of this diploma programme included coursework in anatomy, physiology, neurophysiology, basic biomechanics, movement observation, functional analysis, and somatic practices. Although the programme initially drew from Ideokinesis and Structural Integration, it quickly moved to include an understanding of the founding principles of a number of different somatic approaches, such as Feldenkrais, Alexander, and Body- Mind Centering – in order to provide dance educators with an integrative overview of somatic practice, and how various methods could be applied in the field of dance.

Today, AFCMD continues to draw from kinaesiology and somatics, and is centred on developing each dancer's perception of his or her own neuromuscular coordination. Unlike pedagogical approaches historically adopted in dance, wherein students must conform to technical or aesthetic norms imposed by different teachers or forms, AFCMD practitioners strive to adjust their teaching approach or lessons to the unique needs of every student (Godard 1990b). As such, each practitioner develops different protocols that help identify their own or their students' unique coordination processes, allowing them to offer neuromuscular facilitation within various movement contexts. Thus, the kind of movement analysis proposed by AFCMD focuses not only on the more easily visible structures of movement, but also on more subtle elements such as internal changes related to intentionality of the mover, or the postural support system preceding a given movement or gesture (Topin 2001).

3. An introduction to the introspection interview

After our movement explorations, the participants were introduced to a specific approach to verbalising their workshop experience known as the 'explicitation interview', which is a form of "retrospective introspection" (Vermersch 2005, Vermersch 2009, Vermersch 1999).

Figure 1: Nicole Harbonnier and Helen Simard introduce 'explicitation interview'



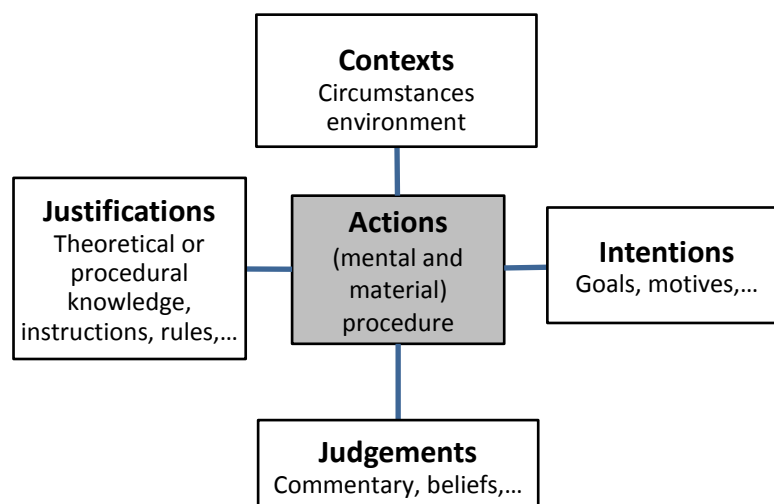
Developed by the psychologist and researcher Pierre Vermersch (*Centre National de Recherche Scientifique-CNRS; Groupe de Recherche sur l'Explicitation-GREX*), this qualitative interview technique was designed to obtain detailed, descriptive verbalisations “based on acts of introspection relating to a past lived experience (in the recent or more distant past)” (Vermersch 2009). Put differently, the explicitation interview is designed to allow individuals to access dimensions of their lived experiences and actions of which they are perhaps not immediately conscious. This technique is often used to interview individuals in professional practices, or those who are engaged in the performance of a specific task; the purpose of conducting this kind of introspection interview is both to allow individuals to gain insight on what actually happened in a given situation or activity, as well as to shed light on implicit knowledge that they have in regards to their own actions (Vermersch 2000). Ultimately, the goal of such a verbalisation of lived experience is to assist individuals in auto-informing themselves in regards to the implicit, pre-reflexive knowledge they have in regards to their actions. Since this interview technique is designed to solicit precise verbalisations of lived past experiences, it permits the implicit knowledge contained within a movement to emerge explicitly on the linguistic level and may allow individuals to gain a deeper awareness of their movement practices.

According to Vermersch (2000), some of the defining elements of an introspection interview are that it:

- gains access to the participant's point of view, from a first-person perspective;
- assumes the participant has a pre-reflexive, implicit, practical knowledge of his or her lived experiences;
- considers action (both mental and material) as the preferred source of information;
- focuses on process, or the procedural dimension of said actions;
- aims to create the conditions necessary to allow the participant to enter a state of ‘evocation’, by accessing and describing specific, embodied memories.

Rather than simply giving a generalised overview of the entire activity, individuals are encouraged to and guided through recounting a precise and revealing moment within their actions. The idea is that by providing a genuine description of concrete experience, individuals can deepen their knowledge of their own practice, since actions are not generalised events, but rather specific, complex occurrences that simultaneously implicate the individual in several different levels of lived experience (Vermersch 2009). Of course, through the description of concrete actions (both mental and material), other types of information relating to the activity may emerge over the course of the interview. Vermersch (2000) refers to these other kinds of information as “satellites” of the action, which might include: the context or circumstances in which the action took place; the individual’s intentions or motivations in regards to conducting the action; the individual’s belief systems or value judgements that influenced the action; and the technical or procedural knowledge the individual drew on to justify or negate the course of action (see figure 1).

Figure 2: The System of Lived Experience: Action and Related 'Satellite' Information*



* Vermersch, P. (2000) *L'entretien d'explicitation*, 3 ed., Issy-les-Moulineaux: ESF, p.45.

According to Vermersch (2000), the introspective interview consists of the six following steps:

- 1) Initialising: establishing a good interview relationship with the participant and ensuring consent
- 2) Focusing: targeting a specific moment or experience for discussion
- 3) Elucidating: soliciting a clear description of the moment or experience in question (This is the heart of the interview)
- 4) Fragmentation of the description: “going to the level of detail required to make the described action intelligible, in relation to the aims of the study” (Vermersch 2005)
- 5) Regulating (or guiding the interviewee): resituating the participant in the context; maintaining focus on the specified moment; renegotiating interview relationship as needed
- 6) Closing: ensuring that the interview wraps up, and confirming that the participant is satisfied with what he or she has said in regards to the experience.

The interviewer generally begins by asking the participant to walk through some of the contextual information surrounding the activity, such as the circumstances (work, leisure, habitual activity or one-time occurrence), time (day, time, season), and space (home, work, indoor, outdoor, precise location or orientation in a specific room) in which it took place, and might even ask the participant what he or she was wearing that day. Vermersch (2000) argues that examining these kinds of details effectively resituates participants in the moment in question, aiding them to enter a state of evocation in which they may more easily recount details of the event of which they are not consciously aware.

Once the participant is resituated in the moment, the rest of the interview focuses on a precise and minute description of the action in question. Thus, it is important for the interviewer to recognise if and when the participant slips into providing other kinds of information (context, intentions, judgements, or procedural knowledge) in order to assist him or her to remain

focused on the description of his or her mental and material actions. Since qualitative studies often focus on understanding why individuals engage in various social activities (Husserl 1970), this insistence on focusing on what people do, as opposed to why they do it, may seem counter-intuitive to some. However, Vermersch proposes that human beings create meaning from action, as opposed to actions being dictated by meanings. Thus, he argues that this retrospective verbalisation of actions can provide a ‘fertile ground’ from which the meaning of the activity can emerge.

4. A somatic education lesson on the influence between relation to gravity and walking coordination

Our workshop began with movement explorations inspired by what Godard refers to as an individual’s “functional predisposition” (*terrain fonctionnel*), which he defines as an “innate tendency, orienting (ascending or descending dynamics) our way of dealing with gravity, physically and symbolically” (Godard 1990a, McHose and Godard 2006, Newton 1995, Godard et al. 1994). Godard proposes that posture is a base coordination through which each individual builds his or her preferred relationship to gravity, and by which all other movement patterns can be understood or analysed (Godard, 1990b).

The participants were invited to begin to identify their own functional predisposition using three different tests: first, by gesturing towards the ceiling with their index finger; second, by bending and extending their legs while gliding their backs along a wall; and third, by jumping, feet together, while a partner either emphasised the down accent of the jump by pushing down on their shoulders, or emphasised the up accent of the jump by gently lifting their ribcage from behind on the up accent. Godard’s (1990a) hypothesis is that an individual who initiates the gesture towards the ceiling from the pelvis, the extension of the legs while gliding the back along the wall by pushing the feet into the floor, or feels more comfortable jumping when a partner pushes on his or her shoulders is probably orienting his or her relationship to gravity in an ascending dynamic. On the other hand, he proposes that the person who initiates the gesture towards the ceiling with the upper body, the extension of the legs while gliding the back along the wall by reaching with the head, or feels more comfortable jumping when a partner lifts his or her ribcage is more likely orienting his or her relationship to gravity in a descending dynamic.



Figure 3:
A descending dynamic during the jump

Having begun to identify their own functional predispositions, we then invited the participants to explore their walking patterns through two different exercises. First, we asked them to walk around the room in order to take note of their usual or “natural” walking patterns. We proposed they could take note of different elements of the movement such as the speed of their gait, how weight was distributed through their feet, and the manner in which the swing of the arms was coordinated with their steps. Once they had identified key elements of their own walk, the participants were asked to close their eyes and listen to one volunteer walking around the room, all the while considering how this individual’s walk differed from their own. Was the gait faster or slower than theirs had been? Did the step have a heavier heel strike, or articulate lightly through the toes? Did the volunteer seem to favour one foot over the other in their stride?

Once they had taken note of these differences, the participants were asked to open their eyes and attempt to recreate the walk that they had just heard. In order to accomplish this, they might have to slow down or speed up their gait, shift their weight into the heel or ball of the foot, adjust which part of their body that initiated the movement, or even change their whole posture. The exercise was repeated several times with different volunteers, with the participants alternating between their own walking patterns and the patterns of others. In taking note of and attempting to mimic the walking patterns of others, the participants began to reorganise what defined their own postural alignment and functional predispositions, and thus gained a deeper awareness of their own walking patterns.

In the second exercise, we invited the participants to once again stand with their eyes closed, this time with one foot ahead of the other and their weight in the back foot. They were then asked to transfer their weight slowly to the front foot, lifting the back foot to take a step forward. As they took this step, we encouraged them to note of what changes occurred in various parts of their bodies, such as: the front foot, the back foot, the front leg, the back leg, the pelvis, the spine, the rib cage, the head, and their respiration. What part of the body initiated the movement or advanced first? How was their breathing pattern organised in relation to their steps? Was their stride propelled by one foot more than the other, or was the weight distributed evenly between both feet?

Figure 4 : Participants’ walk with eyes closed



As the participants crossed the room, slowly building awareness of the mechanics of their walking pattern, we encouraged them to explore how they could alter or reorganise this habitual pattern in a different way. Could they change the point of initiation of the movement, or the chronology of which parts of the body advanced first? For example, could a participant who had initiated their walk from a lengthening of the spine or forward inclination of the ribcage instead begin the movement with a forward propulsion of the hips, or a grounding of the feet? Did such changes cause them to lose balance, or actually give them more stability? By exploring both subtle and drastic changes that could be made to their walk, the participants were able to gain awareness of this highly complex, yet pedestrian and often unconscious, movement pattern. As such, they gained further insight as to their functional predisposition, or how they organised their posture in relation to gravity.

5. Verbalising the somatic experience through retrospective introspection

Immediately following our somatic explorations, we invited participants to take a moment to reflect back individually on the workshop, to see if any particular moment came back as being particularly significant or marking to them. By significant, we explained that it could be a moment that they had found particularly enjoyable, one during which they felt they had learned something about their own movement processes, or simply a moment that struck them spontaneously as being relevant. Some participants chose to conduct this reflection mentally, while others wrote down the key points that they had retained from the exercises. Following this reflection time, we asked if any of the participants wanted to participate in short explicitation interviews in order to revisit and further explore a moment they felt was important. A few participants volunteered, and scheduled appointments to meet with us over the rest of the conference. The examples in this section are points of interest that emerged from some of these interviews.

We began each interview by asking the participants to walk us through the moment they had chosen, and employed several different strategies to regulate the manner in which their verbalisation occurred. For instance, we asked a number of contextual questions in regards to the experience: where had they been standing in the room at this moment? What direction were they facing? Who were they standing next to? Did anyone in their field of consciousness say or do anything noteworthy at that moment. While these details may seem unimportant or trivial, Vermersch (2000) argues that reviewing them can assist participants in resituating themselves in the experience, thus allowing them better to elucidate their experiences.

Another strategy that can be employed is that once the specific, significant moment has been identified, the participant was asked to go back a few seconds, and describe what had happened just before this moment. As Vermersch explains, bringing participants to describe what had happened just before the revelatory moment allows them to further fragment the experience, permitting them to take into account minute details of which they might not have been consciously aware. For example, one participant wanted to be interviewed in order to discuss a moment that had occurred during the first walking exercise, where, along with the group, he had tried to mimic the walking pattern of another participant he had listened to walking around the room while his eyes were closed. He explained that he had felt relieved when he opened his eyes and confirmed his feeling that his own walking pattern was nothing like the other participant's. In this moment, he had suddenly felt he was able to explore

his own walk more freely, and was interested in understanding what had caused this sensation of release. When he was asked to describe what had happened directly before this, the participant described standing with his eyes closed, listening to the other participant walking. He said that when he attempted to recreate this walking pattern, he felt pressed down or crushed, and that his throat was constricted. In contrast, he was able to identify that when he saw the other person walking he experienced a feeling of relief, which he specified was on a somatic level linked to a sensation of blood flowing through his body, a dropping in his abdomen, more freedom in his breath and throat, and a mobility in his eyes. It is interesting to note that while this experience could have been seen primarily as an emotional reaction or value judgement on the participant's part, we see that verbalising the experience allowed him to deepen his kinaesthetic awareness, and identify a number of precise, minute internal physical changes that took place in his experience.

In another interview, a participant made an interesting discovery about the way that she stored, processed, and recalled information relating to her somatic experiences. This participant wanted to talk about a step she took during the second walking exercise, when she transferred her weight from her back foot onto her front foot. In this moment, she had suddenly felt unstable, and was interested in understanding both what had thrown her off balance and also how she had managed to steady herself. In order to describe the moment in which she took the step forward and felt imbalanced, the participant explained that she was drawing from a visual sense of watching herself walking from behind. As she viewed herself in this way, she felt that something was missing from the image, as if part of her body vital to the action could not be seen from this perspective. At this point, a different interview strategy was employed, and she was asked to describe the movement from the perspective of her physical sensations of her actions instead of by her visual sense of the event. As she described where she felt the movement was taking place in her body, the participant was able to identify that her heel was the body part that was missing from her visual image, and from where the instability originated: she could sense that her weight was shifted too far forward, and that her heel was not fully coming into contact with the ground. Here, it is interesting to note that verbalisation allowed the participant not only to gain a deeper awareness about the instability in her walking pattern, but to recognise that she could draw on different kinds of sensorial data (in this case, physical and visual sensations) to recall and analyse her somatic experiences.

Figure 5: The recall of sensations during a transfer of weight in a step forward



While these two examples show how explicitation interview techniques can be used immediately following or soon after a somatic exploration to solicit a precise description of the experience, this approach can also be used to revisit experiences that took place much further in the past. For example, another participant wanted to be interviewed following the workshop in order to revisit a moment she remembered from a performance that had taken place quite some time previously. She remembered this performance as being particularly enjoyable, but was not sure what exactly gave her this impression. Through her interview, she was able to identify that her pleasure in the performance was related to an expanded awareness of the space around her. She was able to describe the moment when she changed direction, turning to face the audience. In this moment, she felt conscious of her whole environment (other dancers, audience, stage markings) and did not feel restricted by the demands of the choreography. Whereas this sense of expansiveness might normally make her feel anxious, she was at this moment able to manage the details of the performance without losing a sense of ease and relationship to the audience and fellow dancers. Following the interview, this participant told us that verbalising her experience in this way had allowed her to take note of a number of details concerning the event that she had either forgotten, or of which she had not consciously taken note at the time of the performance. As such, she felt that Vermersch's approach to retrospective introspection and verbalisation of lived experiences could be particularly valuable tools in her practice based research.

6. Conclusion: Towards a phenomenological pedagogy. (Glaser and Strauss 2010)

Describing or defining somatic experiences is never an easy task. In this chapter, we have proposed that the use of introspective verbalisation techniques drawn from Vermersch's (2000) explicitation interview approach may allow somatic educators to solicit minute and precise descriptions of actions performed by students in the context of somatic education lessons. Making reference to examples drawn from our workshop at the *Dance and Somatic Practices Conference* at the University of Coventry, we have shown how using this interview technique allowed participants to gain a deeper awareness of their kinaesthetic experiences. As such, unlike mental imagery or visualisation techniques often used in dance and movement education, where participants are encouraged to use imagined metaphorical or technical images to improve performance (Hanrahan and Vergeer 2001), we have argued that verbalisations based on retrospective introspection of lived experience can permit somatic practitioners to gain subtle yet highly relevant information that they could draw on in future somatic explorations, learning situations, or performances.

As we have mentioned, Vermersch's (2000) position that awareness of an experience is best developed through a precise and minute description of the actions involved in the process may seem counter-intuitive to individuals unfamiliar with his approach; additionally, it should be mentioned that several of the workshop participants wondered if the technique might not potentially solicit strong emotional responses through the revisiting of past lived experiences, and felt it at times resembled interview techniques that might be employed in psychological analysis or therapeutic settings. As such, we recommend that somatic practitioners interested in using Vermersch's approach to retrospective introspection receive formal training in the technique before integrating formal explicitation interviews into their lesson plans. However, without going so far as conducting formal interviews with each and every one of our students, we as somatic educators may find that adopting a mode of reflection centred on a

retrospective introspection on and verbalisation of precise actions performed at a particular moment can aid student and teacher alike to achieve a greater capacity for autonomous learning and reflexive self-awareness. By recognising that each action is a unique and complex process, we are also reminded that each student is a unique individual with particular needs. Thus, by providing our students (and ourselves) with the tools needed to verbalise their somatic experiences, we allow them to bring the implicit knowledge contained in their movement explorations to a linguistic level, encouraging them to bring the lessons learned through their movement practices out of the dance studio and into their everyday lives. After twenty-five years of development, and with more than fifty certified instructors in France, Switzerland, Italy, and Canada continuing to train students in explicitation interview techniques, we are persuaded that Vermersch's approach to retrospective introspection can provide somatic education and practitioners with those tools.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants of the '*Dance & Somatic Practices Conference 2013: Attending to Movement: Somatic perspectives on living in this world*' who very generously shared their somatic experiences with us, and authorized their description in this chapter.

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