

Awareness Through Movement as a Catalyst for Change

Kathryn Goldman Schuyler¹

Can Awareness Through Movement lessons (ATM), taught as part of a university graduate course, catalyze significant change in people who otherwise have no experience with the Feldenkrais Method? That is what I explored with very positive results. I have been intrigued since the Amherst training with the question of how to encourage people to make connections through movement which will promote learning in other areas of their lives. I remember walking around the hills of the campus during our training, thinking about analogies I felt between the way I moved physically and the way I “moved” metaphorically in relationships. This course was the fruition of fifteen-plus years of allowing these perceptions and thoughts to simmer in the back of my mind.

I developed and taught three sessions of a graduate workshop, titled “The Art of Change: Somatic Awareness and Systems Thinking,” at a graduate school of professional psychology. I introduced Awareness Through Movement sequences as a means to help people make changes in their lives and work. Students who enrolled were studying in master’s programs in organizational, clinical, and sports psychology.

In the workshop (offered on Friday evening from 6–9 pm and Saturday from 10 am–5 pm), I presented ATMs, gave several briefings about the Feldenkrais Method and the nature of change, led group discussions based on this material, and designed questions for the students to discuss in pairs about the areas of their lives that they desired to change. I gave two assignments to be completed before the end of the term: (1) Read several articles or a book about the Feldenkrais Method (refer to the reading list at the end of this article), and (2) create a personal project to change some part of your life. Within three to five weeks they wrote papers about this experiment.

Designing the course was an interesting process. I had been thinking about how to incorporate Awareness Through Movement into graduate education and business training for many years. I believe the supportive attitude of the administrators encouraged me in ways that enabled a successful outcome; I had total freedom to experiment. I knew that the students were interested in systems thinking because it is a core element in psychological training, whether of clinicians or organizational consultants. Linking this to anything physical, and to oneself, was not a connection that I thought would be easy for them. Since courses in somatic psychology were not available at our campus, I did not expect that any students would be familiar with the field. In a university setting I believe in encouraging choices, rather than offering training in a specific method. Therefore, I allowed participants to read about other approaches to somatic learning, although experiential learning employed only the Feldenkrais Method.

This is how the course was described in the syllabus:

QUICK OVERVIEW

Lasting change, whether in individual performance or an organization, requires a shift in underlying patterns of action. Unless the new can be integrated with what already exists across the system, the new ways will disappear. This highly experiential course uses movement from the *Feldenkrais Method*® to provide a shortcut for appreciating the systemic nature of change. It can be repeated, as contents will change.

Roughly half of the course involves experiments in movement, formally referred to as *Awareness Through Movement*® sequences. The rest will include brief lectures on key themes and topics, extensive dialogue, and opportunities to apply these concepts to current work in your life. The

¹ California School of Organizational Studies, Alliant International University, 1008 Atlantic Avenue, Alameda, CA 94501; email: Kathryn@coherent.org.

fundamental assumption is that change can be easier than most people anticipate if awareness is used as a tool.

With regard to organizational learning, we can develop and test a body-based series of metaphors for organizational functioning to deal successfully with the complexity of such processes. Presently, we picture organizations in relatively linear, mechanistic ways. The human body is the most complex system that we experience directly, yet most of us do not find ways to use this to develop organic, fluid thinking patterns about either business or organizations in general. It is clear that in order to thrive in coming decades, organizations will require new approaches to organizational design, to the development of change processes, and to strategic planning and implementation. The facilitator, leader, or coach who has experienced the easier and simpler nature of major change will be better able to develop such processes for companies, governments, or non-profits.

In another arena, sports coaches can apply somatic awareness methods to the mental aspects of sports improvement. So much in performance is connected with the athlete's mental and emotional states and his/her ability to bring attention to what is actually happening, rather than attending to what 'should be' taking place. This course will help the sport psychologist appreciate how movement, sensing, and awareness function systemically and can be a source of improvement.

GOALS OF THE COURSE

Knowledge:

- You'll know about the basic concepts of the field of somatic awareness and how they relate to organizational and sports psychology.
- You'll appreciate how the human body can be used as a metaphor for understanding all forms of systems learning and change.

Awareness:

- You'll be more aware of subtle differences in your own movement: where you hold on and what happens when you do and don't.
- You'll explore how body-based learning can be useful for you in effecting change in your work or personal life.

Application:

- You'll complete a short project applying course concepts and experiences to an area of interest to you.

Prior to the beginning of the course, I asked the students to read several articles on the method, which are listed at the end of this article. The reading inspired them to begin thinking about the issues.

I structured the course around four topics: (1) the *art* of change, (2) somatic awareness, (3) systems thinking, (4) *me* and change. I retained these topics as the core themes of the course through all three versions and also kept the same overall structure, although I varied the contents of the briefings and the specific ATMs.

We began with personal introductions, so people could connect directly with one another, as well as with the content and intentions of the course. I then reviewed the agenda and syllabus (especially the goals/objectives). I stressed the uniqueness of the course: to explore and make discoveries about the *art* of change by using ourselves as part of the experiment. I emphasized that they were *not* expected to learn about what others think, but to "cook" what they already knew—the theories about change, about how people learn, about systems thinking—so the new material would become their own.

I proposed that somatic awareness could be a key to unlock the art of change. I varied my presentation to make it interesting and alive in the moment. I asked questions, such as: What limits our freedom to learn and change? How do we shift this, so change will be easier? How do we bring this to our own life? To our work? I asked what we mean by *change*. One meaning is to *replace* (change my clothes, change the color scheme), and another is to *transform* (change the way I relate to people). Could we consider change as moving things around, or change that is a fundamental transformation? How does this occur? What makes it easy—or impossible? I

discussed using somatic experience as a pathway and the Feldenkrais Method as a source of possibilities. After the initial session, I described how previous students had used the course, because I felt this would help them grasp its potential for support in a variety of areas, such as relationships, health issues, and at work

I invited the students to consider how they might apply a few core Feldenkrais concepts to promote change and learning. For the purposes of this course I listed the basics of the Method as follows:

1. learning process □ uniqueness of humans
2. movement as avenue of self □ change
3. differentiation
4. ease – reduce effort – small moves

Other key notions I introduced included:

1. Paying attention, noticing small differences
2. Going slowly to be able to notice
3. Finding ease
4. Noticing how one part affects others
5. Differentiating before integration
6. Distributing movement/action through the whole skeleton (system)
7. Varying the focus: core versus peripheral
8. Initiating from different places
9. Asking: “What needs to move more, in order for the entire system to be more effective □ or to learn this □ or to make this change?”
10. Watching how one handles challenges and obstacles.

I began each session with an ATM that was intended to initially help the participants slow down, sense their movements, and feel more comfortable, and then progress to more complex and demanding sequences. Among those I used were “Frog legs” and “Easy flexibility.” We did different things after the break, during the various iterations of the course, but all of these activities were designed to stimulate them to think about changes they wished to initiate in their lives at this point in time. On some of these Fridays we had time for a second ATM.

Saturday began with a chance to share impressions and thoughts from the first day. Then I led another ATM with a specific purpose in terms of the learning process. For example, I used “Rolling side-to-side” to introduce playfulness and encourage them to explore how actions can impact one in unexpected ways. In another session, we had closed the Friday evening with “Differentiating one side,” so we began Saturday by imagining it on the other side. This let them discover how we use imagined movement to evoke changes. It also gave them a sense of better harmony from side to side. In one session I showed the videotape, entitled *The Feldenkrais Method: An Overview*, to provide a visual sense of the range of the work, something the participants otherwise lacked.

I asked the students to talk over lunch in dyads and small groups about how they might apply what they were learning to their personal life or work. When class resumed, we discussed people’s tentative projects, to encourage them to clarify their thinking and take action. Then I led a more difficult ATM to convey the full range of the way that the method can be used. Among these were “Foot to head” and “Rolling in circles.”

I have found it helpful to present concrete visuals to show people who otherwise have no experience with how somatic learning can change actions and beliefs about oneself or life. In one session I showed cuts from a video that demonstrated how much a child had changed as a result of a series of FI lessons. Subsequently, I used a tape showing my work with a woman who had severe movement limitations. The tape was edited to show an early stage of our work and then cut to a lesson approximately one year later, with dramatic changes evident in her movement and way of relating to people and objects.

I closed the workshop with an ATM that would either feel pleasant, playful, or gentle. Among those were rolling across the floor in sync with others, and “Work with the active (dominant) hand” (Soloway, E., Ed. *Awareness Through Movement Lessons from Alexander Yanai*, Vol. 3, Part 1, #124, pp. 821-830).

The students included both men and women, ranging in age from mid-twenties through mid-forties, with the majority in their thirties. The seminars were small, with a total of twenty-three participants in the three sessions. Most of them quickly could feel the way the work relieved tension they were holding, and many became fascinated by the effect on their state of being, ability to pay attention, and by changes in the way they moved.

Students from the various psychology programs approached the learning process in different ways. It was interesting to see that the clinical students focused on their inner personal issues, as they described what they experienced and asked questions. The sports students were far more concrete, looking immediately at movement and seeing the potential applications to coaching people in their own particular sport. The organizational students had the broadest range of responses. Some were interested in personal applications, while others focused on how this could make a difference in the work environment.

I was amazed by what they discovered and achieved after such a brief experience. Most found that the process of paying more attention to themselves via these slow movements gave them ideas about how to improve other parts of their lives. Their papers reported on changes in areas ranging from a mother's relationship to her five-year-old daughter, to the way they approached pressure at work, to changing their diet. Several sports coaches were so intrigued that they planned to study the method further and explore incorporating it into their coaching.

I have been asked whether it was the ATM experiences that made the difference, or if it was the discussions or personal project planning. I have worked with each of these tools separately. I have asked students to plan personal change projects for years, have used dyadic partnering, and have also taught traditional ATM classes and workshops. While we did not attempt to scientifically measure which aspects of the workshop had what result, I believe that it was the combination of the project, the ATMs, and reading that enabled these students to experience such broad impacts. ATM was a new experience for most and, at the least, a focused "request" to shift their experience of themselves. I have found that some people can enjoy ATM and then forget what they felt and thought they were learning. By being asked to read about it, the students had the opportunity to understand its broader context and the concepts behind it. Then, by having to think through and carry out a personal project, they had to verbalize what benefits they sought and were discovering. If we had gone too quickly into the cognitive "head-learning," they might not have had the space to sense what was new and different in themselves via this work. Incorporating the cognitive learning afterwards asked that they integrate the changes in a way that ATM classes often do not.

I believe that more change occurred for the participants in these workshops because of the greater demand for them to carry the awareness with them into their lives and actions. Having to do a personal project and write about it may have created just the right amount of focus or demand, and the awareness made possible by their experiences of ATM could then be used in other parts of their lives. It seems that the combination of awareness training, ATM, and a learning structure that generates a desire to use the work in daily life may be the critical combination of ingredients.

A single mother bought "Move Like the Animals" and experimented with doing the movements with her daughter, intending to improve their relationship. She discovered that her daughter loved the music and movements and that this time together became very special in both of their lives. Her daughter began to wake up more easily, was willing to eat a good breakfast, and felt like her mom was becoming "nicer." The mom commented that by relaxing occasionally and taking this time to be together, she also felt like a nicer person!

A woman who was a project manager for an engineering firm came to the course wanting to make changes in the way she approached her work. She wrote, "I am never very aware of my body, and when I get busy, I completely overlook the needs of my body. I become, what I call a 'floating head.' My awareness is exclusively in my head, I don't feel I have a body, and am disconnected from it." She began incorporating movement experiments directly into her life. She played with the way she got out of bed, based on suggestions from Ruthy Alon's book, *Mindful Spontaneity*. "Her words echoed through my mind during my long days at work, and I started to do two things, I started to notice and observe what I was doing at work and evaluate what I was doing. I watched myself pushing myself to the limit, using my determination to push myself again and again, not noticing what my soul or body needed. I noticed how I went through a 10-hour day without taking a real break, how I neglected to go to the bathroom for hours although I felt the need, how I sat at my desk hour after hour without getting up, and how I got so overwhelmed from all the work that I could not concentrate anymore nor

think straight....” Gradually, she began to take note of her body during the day, attending to its requests and needs. Then, she began to look for ways to do things more easily. “The workload didn’t decrease, but just allowing myself the freedom to look at my choices, and even acknowledging that I had some choices as to how I viewed my work, was very helpful. The biggest step was noticing what was going on, which is the first step to making change. Only when I am aware of what I am doing, can I evaluate it and look for other options.”

One man used the workshop project to help himself go to sleep at night. “The act of honoring what my body is telling me in the classroom activities validates my appreciation for my body and opens me to a new way to learn. This is a sense that I can cognitively respond from my body. The lesson for me is that my body can help me with things in my life that I once thought of as jobs for my brain. If I don't involve my body in solving, I will have an incomplete and less powerful response.” Paying attention to his body reminded him that he used to listen to music to put himself to sleep. For his class experiment, he began by listening to music and ultimately shifted to internal “mental music,” which seemed to work equally well.

An athletic coach, decided to learn more and to incorporate it into his coaching. He wrote, “A golfer seeing his swing from the perspective of his own hands is one way for him to view things in a new light. Instead of focusing his thinking on the club, allowing himself to really feel the motion of his hands. What angles do they move in during the swing? Where are the sources of tension? How could the movements be easier and more free flowing? Asking the athlete questions in this fashion will allow them to understand their movements and thus create a strong bond between the mind-body relationship.”

The owner of a small business used the work to shift her breathing and self-image. While she initially approached it with an "academic motivation," it affected her profoundly on a personal level. She wrote, “The class exercises were surprisingly invigorating. I had taken for granted how my body supports me in my pursuits. Intellectually I did not understand how changing simple behaviors could effect my personal growth.” She went on to read Feldenkrais’s *Awareness Through Movement* and work with the lessons. “I have a lot of responsibilities and often get very stressed out managing staff, projects, serving clients, and maintaining a healthy profit and loss margin. I wanted to become more aware of how I was not adequately breathing and also take time to meditate and consciously breathe. I wanted to have a new relationship to my breath. One that acknowledged its vital role not only in staying alive, but in thriving under stress. Within two weeks I noticed that at work I was able to remain calmer in stressful situations. Instead of regressing to not breathing, I took more breaks throughout the day and when a challenge appeared, I stepped back from the situation and did some deep breathing meditations. I also noticed that after I have been practicing the Feldenkrais breathing patterns, I became aware that my confidence increased.”

Moshe wrote that the purpose of the work was to help people to realize their unavowed dreams. (Feldenkrais, 1979) He often made comments that he was not very interested in simply improving movement, but in shifting people’s capacity to act in ways that made a difference in their lives. Because the class focused directly on application of Feldenkrais principles to broader areas of the students’ lives, I saw them apply their learning from the workshop to a wide range of personal dreams. I was delighted to see that although we generally encourage people to participate in classes weekly for extended periods, the work can be tremendously powerful in one small intensive experience and can generate new actions and thinking.

It was challenging for me to introduce people to the movements sufficiently, so they would be able to use the principles behind them. It was easy to talk about the ideas or to do the movements. It was difficult to go back and forth, as it felt like it required using a different part of my brain. The first time I tried it, I got a headache, but gradually it became natural and comfortable. When I used similar movements with a comparable group of students, but described the context as an opportunity for self-awareness and revitalization, no one achieved the progress that participants of the workshop did when the method was presented as a tool for transformation.

Moshe wrote in *The Master Moves* that what was key in learning was not learning new things. “The learning that enables you to do the thing you *know* in another way, and one more way, and then three more ways, is the learning that is important. ... The more ways you have to do the things you know, the freer is your choice. And the freer your choice, the more you’re a human being.” (Feldenkrais, 1984, pp. 19-20) Whenever I heard Moshe teach, he led us through the structured movements that he called ATM, but at the same time he spoke of the arts, freedom, religion, of all aspects of human development and action. For example, in a lesson entitled

“The Seventh Cervical,” he spoke of the origins of war, Krishnamurti, going beyond childhood development, his own experiences as a *halutz* (a worker), and many other things[] all to help those in the workshop discover for themselves that “our simple way of doing things is not as simple as it looks,” (Feldenkrais, 1984, p. 136) and that we need to learn how to learn in order to become fully human. I have always believed that this was his main interest, not the movement itself.

The result of introducing Awareness Through Movement in this short workshop was that many of the participants had experiences that were new or reminded them of what they personally held to be most important in life. As one student wrote:

“In class, it came as a specific feeling to me and when I think of it, I actually get a sense of wonder and awe at this feeling. It is as if I am looking at a glass lake on a day when the air is at body temperature. I would describe it as a feeling of specific awareness about myself, but also taking the whole of everything in. It's a feeling as if I am one with the universe, yet also separate and unique. It almost feels as if I am a little kid again and everything is new, yet wonderful and comforting. The reason that I have tried to capture this feeling is that it is what struck me as most useful and helpful in the class.”

When we experiment with the ways we teach, and provide context for Awareness Through Movement, we also learn to implement what we “know” in new ways. Moshe loved to say that each student of his would develop his or her own handwriting. We may discover things are possible that even *we* do not anticipate.