

# "Dancing with Socrates"

The Feldenkrais Method as an approach to dance training.

Presenter:

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**Abstract:** In the "socratic method" questions and answers are posed as a means of evoking knowledge. The Feldenkrais Method of somatic education is "socratic" in that it evokes peoples' knowledge of themselves through asking them questions about their experience of moving. When applied to dance training, Feldenkrais lessons engage dancers in absorbing themselves in their experience of moving. The knowledge evoked enables dancers to better meet the technical requirements of a particular dance style. By learning to ask themselves appropriate questions, dancers become better learners.

We want dancers to learn. More than that, we want them to take an active part in their learning - to be learners. How can we equip dancers to be learners? Being a learner involves having the know-how to direct one's own learning process. This short paper outlines how Feldenkrais Method processes resource dancers to be learners.

The central proposal of this paper is that by doing Feldenkrais lessons dancers learn to ask the kinds of questions that enable them to inquire more deeply into what there is to know about their movement, their dance technique, their art, and themselves. Anyone who has ever done a Feldenkrais Method group class (called Awareness Through Movement lessons) will most likely tell you that the teacher asks a lot of questions, and very rarely gives any definite answers, except as a way of prompting more questions. The Feldenkrais Method was developed by, and named after, Moshe Feldenkrais DSc. Moshe was born into a Jewish culture and as an adult learned and professionally practised the scientific method of inquiry. Both these facts are significant in that they profoundly shaped the nature of Feldenkrais Method (FM) pedagogy.

A prominent feature of FM pedagogy is the idea of evoking knowledge through the asking of questions. The idea that questions generate knowledge is central to studying Talmud in Judaic culture, and also knowing about the natural world in the western scientific tradition (Gelernter, 1996). An idealised, simplified version of both processes may look something like this. There is a desire to know about something. A question is posed. Seeking takes place (discussion, experiment, exploration, etc). Tentative answers are proposed. The same tentative answers expand knowing but also form the basis for more questions. And so the loop, and the learning, goes on.

Without intending to romanticise childhood, it is worth noting that young children ask lots of questions. And, if undiscouraged, children persistently keep asking questions until their curiosity is satisfied, after which they move on to the next thing. Moshe Feldenkrais thought, based on scientific and anthropological evidence, that curiosity was part of our biological endowment, that it is inherent in our human embodiment. This premise permeates the system of somatic education he created. An intent in FM lessons is to evoke curiosity, to engage participants so deeply in their experience that it awakens within them a desire to know. Moshe Feldenkrais believed that all too often the desire to know – human curiosity – was sublimated in western models of education. He sought to redress this by emphasising self-directed learning.

So where does Socrates fit into all this? After experiencing the work of Moshe Feldenkrais in 1979 Maxine Sheets Johnstone, a North American phenomenological philosopher, summarised one aspect of Feldenkrais Method pedagogy in the following way: "To the extent that one discovers what has always been potentially present but unrealised, Feldenkrais Method might be described as maieutic or socratic, ... [the Feldenkrais teacher] playing the part of a corporeal rather than conceptual midwife" (Sheets-Johnstone, 1979:26).

Socrates was actually a famous ancient Greek philosopher, not a midwife. He developed a method of inquiry in which a series of questions and answers are asked and given with the intent of eliciting "potential knowledge" from his listeners. A teacher using the "socratic method" assumes that each person's mind is "pregnant" with potential knowledge. "Socrates regarded himself as a midwife (maieutria; Greek, maia, "midwife") using this method to assist in the birth of ideas ..." (Angeles, 1981). To speak of knowledge as something a person "gives birth" to is to propose that knowing is a generative act, and that knowledge is the creation of the knower. To speak of a teacher as a "midwife" is to propose that the teacher's role is to facilitate the act of generating knowledge.

Metaphorically, to dance with Socrates is to actively engage in the "socratic" dance of knowing through questioning. Socrates may have been a philosopher but that does not mean only philosophers can dance the "socratic dance". Nor does it mean that "socratic dancing" is just for theatres of the intellect. Within the FM the "socratic dance" flourishes in "bodily" realms, addressing what we might know about ourselves through the medium of movement. The FM offers to teachers of dancing, a formed, movement based, pedagogy which they can use to engage their students in the Socratic dance of knowing.

The questions asked in an FM lesson are of two kinds. The first kind are questions about what you are doing - questions of this kind evoke knowing about your own body and how you are moving. The second kind are questions about what do you want to be doing - questions that evoke knowing your movement intentions. The two kinds of questions are complimentary. Knowing how you are moving enables you to know whether you are really moving in the manner intended. Knowing your movement intention enables you to more precisely navigate your movements. Overall, both kinds of questions are intended to increase awareness of all components of action.

This may all sound like a lot of thinking. It may be, but the quality of the seeking is one of complete absorption. In FM lessons dancers are encouraged to absorb themselves in the experience of moving. There is no visible model of movement to emulate - a Feldenkrais Method teacher does not demonstrate the movements forming a lesson. Such demonstration would be pointless because the goal of a lesson is not to achieve a particular movement but to experience oneself moving, to be aware of oneself in action. These experiences become the very foundation of learning.

In the Feldenkrais Method "to be aware" simply means "to listen", "to notice" to "pay attention". In listening, in noticing, in paying attention, we ... embark on a journey in which we progressively map the whole of our bodies, our moving selves, and in this sense ultimately reforge our body image. ... What is learned as a result of this awareness is obviously not a repertoire of movement skills. ... with the Feldenkrais [Method] one does not learn movements but learns how to move himself and herself.

Sheets-Johnstone, 1979:27

It is important to know that FM lessons are not "free-for-all", experiential movement improvisations. The movement sequences have a definite structure intended to steer participants towards exploring specific combinations and co-ordinations of movements. The combinations and co-ordinations of movements forming a particular lesson afford certain kinds of experiences. In the same way that eating an orange affords experiencing tastes, smells, textures etc unique to an orange, doing particular combinations and co-ordinations of movement enables dancers to experience sensations, feelings and thoughts unique to that particular combination and co-ordination of movement. The kinetic structure of a lesson creates an environment in which certain kinds of experiences are likely to emerge. The questions a FM teacher asks assist dancers to navigate their way through the lesson, making it more likely that potential knowledge is realised.

## References

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## Biography of Presenter

Zoran Kovich has over 25 years experience in movement arts. Initially a martial artist, he studied Dance at the Victorian College of the Arts and then danced professionally for six years with large and small Australian companies as well as independently.

Since 1990 Zoran has been lecturing in NSW college and university Dance programs, developing and presenting courses in Somatics, Embodied Anatomy, and Movement Analysis. His teaching focuses on facilitating technical ability, performance quality and personal presence through deepening performers' experience of their embodiment.

One of the first professional dancers in Australia to graduate as a Feldenkrais method teacher in 1991, Zoran also has 16 years practice in using Anatomical Imagery (Ideokinesis) to facilitate movement. With an academic background in Social Science, Dance, and Cognitive Science, Zoran creatively integrates theory and practice to meet the unique interests of each person or group.