

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 21 Number 7

February 5, 2020

Exploring New Methodological Options: Collaborative Teaching Involving Song, Dance and the Alexander Technique

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Citation: Kvammen, A.C., Hagen, J.K., Parker, S. (2020). Exploring new methodical options: Collaborative teaching involving song, dance and the Alexander Technique. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 21(7). Retrieved from <http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea21n7/>.

Abstract

In an attempt to bridge the gap between the distinct pedagogical strategies often employed in the respective fields of song and dance, this study investigates how collaborative teaching and dialogue can serve as a starting point in finding new teaching and learning methods. This pilot study involving three teacher-researchers and three students aims to show how the practical work of Alexander Technique (AT)

applies the theory of embodied cognition and embodied learning in a practical context. Findings suggest that education and learning processes in the field of musical theatre need to have their foundation in the domain of embodied learning. We argue that the dichotomies between mind and body influence methodology and the way we use language; we propose AT as a method to guide collaborative teaching in order to discover how the student learns in an embodied way, implementing principles from AT in the teaching of musical theatre students.

Introduction

Henrik Ibsen, the famous Norwegian poet, once wrote, “Be what you are, complete and whole, not a divided, piecemeal soul.” Although this is engraved in the pavement of Oslo’s main boulevard and is familiar to Norwegians, young and old, it appears to be rarely truly engraved in systems of education in the age in which we live. The pilot project that will be outlined in this article takes as its main arena common learning processes involved in musical theatre education and aims to address and challenge the issue of piecemeal teaching by introducing core principles of the Alexander Technique (AT). This practical method was applied in this project to guide and encourage collaborative teaching between song and dance teachers. Our aim was to investigate a more integrative approach in the pedagogical processes, emphasizing collaborative teaching, while learning to blend the modalities of song and dance for use as musical theatre practitioners.

Due to the prevalence of numerous ‘body-based’ methods, some of which can appear contradictory to one another, our experience is that there can be a tendency to separate learning modalities into mental and physical processes. Up until now, little attention has been paid to whether the practical teaching of musical theatre students tends to perpetuate so-called ‘mental’ and ‘physical’ approaches to learning, thereby drawing on a dualistic tradition in both language and practical teaching methods.

The data used in this article is from a collaborative action research project consisting of three third-year students from the Norwegian College of Musical Theatre, Oslo, Norway, two voice teachers, one dance teacher, and one Alexander Technique teacher from the field of embodied cognition and learning.

Theoretical Framework

Musical theatre as an art form is interdisciplinary and collaborative in nature, and the “interdisciplinary and the holistic experience of the field already prepare the way for multimodal forms of research,” according to Dunbar (2014, p. 72). He thus argued for

increased practice-based research within the field of musical theatre to “generate exciting new encounters and versions of praxis” (Dunbar, 2014, p. 73). Melton (2015) argued that training triple threats¹ requires efficiency, “which meant letting go of anything that wasn’t essential. Breathing methods for singing are often taught in the context of stillness and of a standing body . . . so ordinary singer instructions had to be rethought” (p. 108). In the same vein, we argue that the pedagogical approaches have to reflect “a common base” (Hagen et. Al., 2017, p. 12) and that the holistic nature of musical theatre requires increased interdisciplinary collaboration methods and new approaches (Hagen et. al., 2017). Based on these arguments, this study is founded on the epistemological understanding that cognition and body cannot be treated separately. Scholars from several fields of study (pedagogy, philosophy, neuroscience, cognition, and the arts) have contributed to this understanding over the last few decades (Juelskjær, Moser, & Schilhab, 2008; Shapiro, 2011), and the theory on which we base our work is labeled under the term “embodied cognition” (Shapiro & Sholtz, 2019). Drawing upon the work of Damasio (2010), Johnson (2007), Gallagher (2005, 2015), Shusterman (2009), Fuchs (2012, 2016), Dewey (1928), Alexander (1932), Varela (1991), Juelskjær et Al. (2008), and Gulliksen (2016), among others, we believe that to learn, to acquire knowledge, and to develop skills are embodied processes and that merging the fields of song and dance is dependent on a deeper understanding of how the mind and the body interact, not only in theory, but in the practical teaching setting in the field of musical theatre. Thus, our epistemological understanding embraces the idea that Gulliksen (2016) referred to as “a turn in the understanding of what learning is, in which the body has become central to learning processes.” Gulliksen (2016) labelled these processes “embodied learning” (p. 3). The notion of embodied and enactive cognition and embodied learning offers an account of how body and brain continually interact not only in the lived human body, but also in interaction with the environment, summarized in these words from Gallagher (2015):

“Cognition, as embodied and enactive, is not exclusively the result of neural processes in the head. It is something accomplished in a dynamic set of interactions between brain and body, and between body and environment” (p. 394).

Hagen et al. (2017) argued that students need deeper insight into these processes in order to improve their learning and, consequently, their performance. In the following sections, we will attempt to explain how we see AT in relation to the concepts of embodied cognition, habits, and collaborative teaching, and draw upon key concepts and literature sources that inform our study.

¹ A triple threat is a performer who excels in acting, singing, and dancing.

Embodied Cognition and the Alexander Technique

The essential principles of AT deal explicitly with a methodology that overcomes the common tendency to separate mind and body in relation to human reaction. To learn AT is to acquire a skill that gives increased knowledge about how mind and body interact: a practical method used to discover and explore “how we do what we do” (Vineyard, 2006, p. 2). It is an educational process that gives students increased awareness of how their thoughts influence their reactions. According to Rosenthal (1987), F. M. Alexander, the developer of the technique, saw “the entire mind-body complex . . . as an interconnected, interdependent whole,” and that, “the Alexander Technique teacher is not expected to be an expert in his student's fields. Instead, he has a different expertise: he knows how people’s habits interfere with their functioning, and he knows how to help them overcome those habits” (p. 53).

Damasio’s (2006, 2010) theories about body-to-brain mapping and how emotions and their biological underpinnings are involved in decision-making are highly relevant in respect to understanding the underlying principles of AT. Addressing what he called a misconception regarding how the body talks to the brain, he wrote, “Another erroneous belief is that the body–brain communication goes one way, from body to brain, but not in the reverse direction . . . body and brain are engaged in a continuous interaction that unfolds in time, within different regions of the body and within mental space as well” (Damasio, 2006, pp. 16–17). To learn AT is to learn about one's (often unconscious) reactions and to become aware of the relationship between stimuli and one's responses (Nettl-Fiol & Vanier, 2011).

In an AT lesson, the teacher communicates both with verbal instructions and with his or her hands, using trained touch to improve the student's overall coordination, including muscle use. Verbal communication combined with hands-on work develops the student's attention, assisting them in the discovery of the two-way dialogue between his or her thoughts and body, referred to as “use” (Alexander, 1932, p.22). As Allen (2009) put it, this can be described as “consciously inhibiting one's tendency to respond to a stimulus in a habitual way” (p. 218). In the context of AT, there are certain principles that are central to its application. Among these, and to which referral is made in this study, are *inhibition* and *direction*. Inhibition, at the core of the technique, is an ability to choose to refuse to react to a stimulus, be it apparently simple or complex in nature. The process of directing, or giving directions, is a simultaneous thought process, while inhibiting encourages an expansive response, both in terms of the coordination of limbs in relation to one’s torso and in terms of an inclusive awareness that encompasses both the surroundings and a kinesthetic sense of self. So, support, for example, could refer to a quality of expansiveness based on the process of inhibition and direction. One could then assert that one’s limbs and coordination in a specific activity are ultimately supported by a directed, expansive torso, not least one’s back, as one’s attention simultaneously takes in the

environment (Alcantara, 1999; Alexander, 1932). In our view, the practical work of AT applies the theory of embodied cognition and embodied learning in a practical context. Self-observation and the core principle of inhibition are the keys to discovering habits, and in the following section we will elaborate on this concept. To uncover habits in practice was one of the crucial elements for both teachers and students in this pilot study.

Habits, Implicit Memory, and Inclusive Awareness

In this study, we use the concept of habit alternately with the concept of implicit (procedural) memory. In this context, we do not define habits in the ordinary way, such as ‘bad’, like the cracking of one's fingers or biting one's fingernails. Rather, the definition is used to address both the teachers’ and the students’ unconscious and repeated ways of reacting to a stimulus. Habits, the way in which we use the concept, include both procedural memory and situational memory (Fuchs, 2012). Procedural memory enables us to perform different tasks, whether to drive a car, cut bread, handle an instrument, or in this context, to sing and dance simultaneously. Performance experiences and countless repetitions become incorporated in a student’s procedural memory. As Fuchs (2012) states, “Through repetition and exercise, a habit develops. Well-practiced patterns of movements and perception become embodied as skills or capacities that we apply in our everyday lives as a matter of course” (p. 10). An important part of our procedural memory is our kinesthetic sense, often used interchangeably with proprioception, which is “the information about movements, tension, balance, and position of body parts relative to each other and to the space surrounding you” (Nettl-Fiol & Vanier, 2011, p. 96). According to Malde, Allen, & Zeller (2013), the concept of *inclusive awareness* covers both implicit memory and situational memory: “the skill of perceiving both self and world simultaneously” (p.8). Implicit memory is therefore not confined to the body itself; according to Fuchs (2012), it extends to “the spaces and situations in which we find ourselves” (p. 13). Thus, habits manifest themselves both as mental, and to a large degree they are unconscious and automatic.

All of the students participating in this study reported that their habits were limiting their performances in song and dance, for example, pulling their hips or head forward, hyperextending their knees, focusing on specific aspects of themselves, or using too much effort in general when singing and dancing. In addition, we as teachers wanted to uncover how our own habitual use of concepts influenced the student’s learning, thereby challenging traditional and established concepts, not least those related to support and breathing technique.

Metaphors We Teach

Unconscious habitual reactions must be seen in context with our language and use of concepts. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argue that metaphors are the key to an adequate

understanding of everyday language, but we are often unaware of which metaphors create our understanding of words and concepts (p. 5). Thurman and Welch (2000) addressed these questions and used the concept of “support” as an example, asking, “What is ‘breath support’ or a ‘well supported tone’?” (p. 353). When a singing teacher tells the student to “support the tone”, which images is the student creating, and how do these images influence breath coordination? Considering the gap in age and experience between most students and teachers, we also need to be aware of the possibility of misinterpretation from both parties, in terms of pre-knowledge, preconception, and emotional experience (Puttke, 2010, p. 102).

Before and during this project, there was a growing awareness in the group as a whole regarding the incorporated use of the concepts *breathing*, *support*, and *center*. The ideas from AT, including the principles of inhibition and direction, and the increased inclusive awareness that encompasses both the surroundings and a kinesthetic sense of oneself, brought to the fore the habitual way in which the teachers normally conveyed these concepts. Thus, the process of self-observation included both teachers and students and provided a framework and opportunity to explore our own teaching habits in a setting of collaborative teaching.

Collaborative Teaching

An increased level of interdisciplinary reflection was one of the main intentions of this project. According to Engeström (2010), expansive learning is “learning in which the learners are involved in constructing and implementing a radically new, wider and more complex object and concept for their activity”, with the core idea of expansive learning being that “learners learn something that is not yet there” (p. 2). Westerlund and Gaunt (2013) argue that there is “a fundamental need to establish an inquiry stance” to evolve higher music education, and they propose a model for a “new integrated paradigm of reflection” (p. 3). In the same vein, Luff and Lebner (2013) questioned whether students learn to be “constructively self-critical” in a master–apprentice setting (p. 173). One-to-one interactions are essential when learning a skill, but as Renshaw (2013) reminds us, “collaborative learning is central to transforming the master–apprentice transmission model of teaching, and to re-examining ways of learning in music education so that they reflect more closely the fundamentally collaborative nature of the art form itself” (p. 237). Together, this literature and theory embrace knowledge on how mind and body interact, the concept of habits, as well as collaborative teaching and dialogue, and as we see it, pertain specifically to our context and the practical work of AT.

Method and methodology

We wanted to investigate how students were interpreting their acquired knowledge from both song and dance teachers, aiming to challenge the traditional and established concepts being

used. In order to reveal what was being taught in song and dance classes, we had to expand our “knowledge of practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 250). This required a broad approach from the teaching staff involved in this project. McNiff (2016) asks, “how do I show what the situation I am in is like at the moment?” (p. 122). The purpose of mapping the knowledge of practice was to improve practice; therefore, we have chosen to contextualize and situate this project within the traditions of the arts-based educational research paradigm (ABER) because “ABER is not aimed toward a quest for certainty. Its purpose may instead be described as the *enhancement of perspectives*” (Barone & Eisner, 2006, p. 96). The methodology of action research is a considerable part of this qualitative research paradigm, expressed in the words of Bøe and Thoresen (2012): “action research can create changes in the way we think and act. By questioning practical methods, we can discover new alternatives and view reality in other ways than we did before” (p. 21., authors’ translation). The characterization of action research projects is that teachers and students are exploring new ways to teach, understand, and evaluate practice, and “[t]he strengths of its design lies in its immediacy because the dance researcher can make changes, while simultaneously observing the results in dance students. Further, action research can offer us ways to contribute more studies, thereby expanding the body of dance education research and making what it is we do more visible inside and outside the field” (Prevots, 2009, p. 39).

To our knowledge, the number of research projects similar to our own – using AT in a collaborative teaching environment – is limited. Nevertheless, there has been an increasing amount of literature addressing the effectiveness of AT in relation to musicians (Klein et al., 2014) and dance training and dancers (Nettl-Fiol, 2006, 2011; Fortin & Girard, 2005). In recent years, the problems of integrating song, dance, and theatre skills have been addressed by several practitioners and scholars within the field of musical theatre (Morton, 2014; Melton, 2012; Pulliam, 2009; Mourik, 2008). Mourik (2008) addresses the “big leap” from the studios and classroom situations to the performance on stage and suggested a new method of collaboration through a new group class “aimed at methodically teaching future performers how to connect and align singing, acting, and movement” (p. 214). In their search for a more “integrative approach to musical theatre” among undergraduate music theatre students, the researchers included team teaching and joint projects (p.217). Melton (2012, 2014) investigates the integration of singing techniques and voice/movement training for the actor; her work prepared the ground for increased dialogue in connecting the worlds of song and dance. Another dance researcher emphasizing dialogue is Antilla (2007), who argues for the strengthening of dialogue in dance education and implemented a broad definition of the word dialogue, including sensing, seeing, silence, and bodily awareness, as a quality in human life and an essential part of educational processes. Antilla (2007) encouraged dance educators to “search for dialogue . . . and question their values and presuppositions” (p. 56). In the following section, we will discuss the different challenges that arose in this study: both the

students' challenges and our own concerns as teachers of musical theatre. We will further discuss the guiding research question and the methods and details about the environment we studied.

The Students' Challenges

With fifteen years of professional experience in singing tuition and dance pedagogy in the field of musical theatre education, the initiating teachers were aware of the challenges students face when translating and making sense of the terms from dance classes into singing classes, and vice-versa (Pulliam, 2009; Melton, 2015; Hagen et al., 2017). Based on the students' narratives, musical theatre students often struggle with integrative processes. A common scenario is that they are taught singing and dancing as separate processes and are left to themselves to figure out how to combine these skills, together with aspects of acting, stage presence, and delivery. Mourik (2008) addressed "a substantial gap between what is needed on stage and what is taught in class", and he further argued, "finally the approach to integrating the separate skills is usually not methodic enough for students to acquire their own set of integration skills that they can independently apply once their formal education is completed" (p. 213). The observation of students' challenges regarding the transitions between song and dance classes and their confusion regarding the frequently used concepts in the field of musical theatre education described in Hagen et al. (2017) led the initiating teachers towards the central research question in this study.

In the preliminary interviews, study participants confirmed that they experienced specific aspects of the teaching in song and dance as contradictory, especially the use of the concepts of *breathing*, *support*, and *center*. These frequently used concepts are often a source of confusion and misunderstanding, as one student suggested:

There are different kinds of 'centeredness' in the dance world, depending on which school one is working with, be it Russian or French, for example. Some styles ask you to pull in your ribcage, while many singing teachers want you to open, so that is one thing that is contradictory. And in dance you are asked to pull in your stomach — some might feel this as being held. While in singing one wants the opposite, that it's not held. In many dance forms one wants that ... but things like this are contradictory.

Another interesting aspect revealed in the preliminary interviews was that the students did not normally practice singing and dancing simultaneously; this might indicate that the students do not have the tools to practice and experiment along these lines, suggesting that the teaching methods need to be reconsidered. Through this process of collaborative teaching, we wanted

to facilitate a deeper awareness when practicing, so as to develop the students' awareness of self-instruction and the ability to analyze their own thoughts and actions.

Ourselves as Researchers

As voice teachers, we have been trained to teach in a master–apprentice approach to learning (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013). Our educational background is from classical singing: early music, lieder, bel canto, and opera. In recent years, we have extended our knowledge about vocalization through courses in contemporary techniques and developed our skills as professional singers in modern cabaret, performing new material in a variety of genres. As a part of our own development as performers and teachers, we have had regular lessons in AT, and the core principles of this practical method have influenced our teaching and writing over the last few years. The dance teacher's main technique training is in ballet, modern dance, and musical theatre. Similar to the singing teachers' training, this training and subsequent teaching practice relies heavily on the demonstration and copying of movement and is based on a modernistic pedagogical paradigm as described in Østern (2017). Allen (2009) refers to a “pervasive influence of the culture of dance training . . . which is concerned almost entirely with striving constantly towards some aesthetic ideal by mechanical means: repetition, conditioning and overload” (p. 218). This culture was an influential part of the dance teacher's background and pedagogical landscape. It should also be noted that before the start of this project, the dance teacher had no experience with AT.

The Alexander Technique teacher has had extensive experience working with modern and classical dancers through his 12-year involvement with the Norwegian Contemporary Dance Company (Nye Carte Blanche, Bergen, Norway) and has also worked for nearly 30 years with singers of all genres. From his experience, he has found that dancers commonly struggle with implementing the concepts of alignment, breathing, and posture while maintaining fluid movement.

The juxtaposition of the fields of song and dance made us reflect upon the pedagogical methods and concepts being used, thus embracing Starks' (2009) point of view: “as a teacher I must be a continual student, questioning and investigating my material, as well as questioning and investigating myself and my students” (p. 68). In discussions and workshops with colleagues at the Norwegian College of Musical Theatre, we gradually came to recognize that our habits as teachers, as well as our methods and the concepts and language we used, did not always benefit students, and we continued to ask ourselves if there was a possibility that misinterpretations might occur when singing and dance teachers have to learn about each other's work through the students' interpretations. How can we be less contradictory in the

way we teach? The gap between teaching methods needs to be illuminated by the students' narratives.

Research Question

We wanted to explore and enrich the concepts and methods used in song and dance classes and thus challenge the habitual use of concepts that are misleading. The fusion between the voice teachers' practical experiences and theoretical knowledge of AT in relation to embodied cognition, combined with the growing discussions and reflections among the teachers at the Norwegian College of Musical Theatre concerning the students' issues in how to merge song and dance, contributed to the emergence of the research question of this study:

- How can collaborative teaching, which includes the practical principles of AT, serve as a tool in finding common ground and a deeper understanding between the teaching modalities in the different areas of song and dance?

Data Collection

The empirical data in this paper is drawn from two main sources: participatory observation during seven group lessons, in which five of these involved joint teaching, and qualitative semi-structured interviews. In order to discover how increased dialogue and collaborative teaching between the teachers involved could contribute to a deeper understanding between the fields, observation in a teaching setting seemed to be the most appropriate method: "if one is interested in discovering what people are doing, one ought to include, if possible, an observation of the method of data-collection" (Tjora, 2017, p. 53., authors' translation). In order to identify the students' experiences from the teaching situations, it was important to "compile descriptions of the interviewees' lifeworld in order to interpret meaning" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2010, p. 23., authors' translation). The interviews and video materials were transcribed, categorized, and analyzed.

These methods are in accordance with Tjora (2017), who emphasizes that the choice of methods has to reflect what the researcher wants to find out. In the same vein, McNiff (2016) states, "gathering data means making decisions about what you wish to show and which data will help you show it" (p. 122). According to Eisner (1991), we are "acknowledging ourselves as instruments in the research process: the way in which we see and respond to a situation, and how we interpret what we see, will bear our own signature" (p. 34). We are aware that this engagement also has the potential for biases and that the singing teachers' personal experiences and commitment with the practical method of AT might make them focus only "on those aspects of the situation or story that supports our preconceptions" (Eisner, 1991, p. 54). The responses relating to combining song and dance were subjective and therefore

susceptible to recall bias (Maxwell, 2012), and the small size of the data set collected from the interviews meant that it was not possible to draw general conclusions, but the students' answers gave us some indications of how they interpreted the concepts of breathing, center, and support, giving us useful insight before we conducted the observation. Observation during the project, the analysis of the collected data, the ensuing discussion among the researchers, and the teaching we did after the project have influenced study findings. Regardless of the obvious limitations of this pilot study, with only three students participating in the group lessons, the findings outlined in this article may provide background material for future research.

The selection of participants was done by asking for four volunteers from among the 25 third-year students. Before attending the BA course, the students at the Norwegian College of Musical Theatre had different backgrounds and training, and of our three participants,² two considered themselves primarily as singers (one female and one male) and one as a dancer (female). The three students had followed the same educational process at MTHS with an equal amount of singing, dancing, and acting classes. This research project was run in parallel with their Bob Fosse project, a five-week workshop focusing on this particular style. All of the performance numbers they worked on contained both dance and song. The project was a combined initiative involving the Norwegian College of Musical Theatre and was also an extension of an ongoing project at the Norwegian Academy of Music (CEMPE³).

Planning and Execution

The planning of the project was done collaboratively, and the teachers had several meetings prior to the pilot project to discuss what we wanted to explore: namely common ground in the teaching of song and dance. We wanted to challenge the master–student relationship and explore the possibilities in the studio while making sure that everyone participated through dialogue and that the students felt safe to articulate their experiences without the fear of being wrong or ignorant or feeling judged, thus creating an “*atmosphere* that opens up the possibility for dialogue”, according to Anttila (2007, p. 54).

The project consisted of three main parts:

- Eight individual lessons in AT for the participating students and teachers
- Seven group lessons in which five contained joint teaching

² There were originally four; unfortunately, one student had to resign from the project soon after its initiation.

³ Centre of Excellence in Music Performance Education.

- Qualitative interviews with the participating students before and after the project

The singing teachers functioned as facilitators, planning the teaching schedule, conducting and recording the interviews, and video-recording the lessons with all the participants. The dance teacher ran the Bob Fosse workshop, which provided the material for use during the research period.

The main aspect of the project was the group lessons involving collaborative teaching. The first lesson contained information about the project and a group discussion around the students' perspective of the challenges in merging the arts of song and dance. The second time we met, we conducted a trial lesson in order to find a suitable form for the ensuing group lessons. The trial provided useful themes for development and experimentation. The remaining four group lessons contained a short introduction whereby the students could talk about their experiences from the previous week, either from the group lesson or from their individual lessons. This discussion was followed by a 20- to 30-minute warm-up in which the students received tuition and guidance from the teachers present. In the last section of the lesson, the students showed, one by one, what they had been working on. Feedback was given from both the fellow students and the teachers, thus facilitating the students to be observant not only in regard to themselves, but also of the others in the group

Analysis and Findings

Several themes emerged from the analysis, but in this article, we have chosen to focus on two main results:

- The principles inherent in the practical method of AT contributed to increased dialogue and understanding between song and dance methodology.
- Collaborative teaching contributed to a deeper understanding among the participants.

Increased dialogue and understanding between methodologies

Fortin (2002), Dayme (2009), Hagen et al. (2017), and Nettle-Fiol and Vanier (2011) address the state of affairs that AT and other so-called 'somatic' ⁴ educational approaches are traditionally seen as complementary subjects in higher educational programs. Despite the

⁴ The term "somatics" was first coined by Thomas Hanna (1928–1990) (Eddy, 2002), and is often referred to as "bodywork, body therapies, hands-on work, body–mind integration, body–mind disciplines, movement therapy, somatic therapy, movement awareness, or movement education" (p. 47). Somatic practices and somatics are often used interchangeably (Allen, 2009, p. 217).

extensive incorporation of such methods, it seems that they have hardly influenced the methods of teaching in either singing or dancing (Dayme, 2009, p. 3), perhaps due to their lack of direct integration in learning scenarios. This by no means implies that AT can replace technical skills in any area of study.

The principles inherent in AT challenge methodologies that underpin a dualistic separation of mind and body, inexpedient repetition, and isolation of elements: for example, breathing exercises. The AT challenges the persistent and living myth that “if I only try hard enough, I will succeed”, or that learning to sing and dance should cost you blood, sweat, and tears, as addressed by Puttke (2010). According to Puttke, this myth is still very much alive, and one of the most notable findings for the students in the research group was how their effort level in both dance and singing was too high and how taking effort away improved their actions.

The problem of effort level is also emphasized by Batson and Schwartz (2007): the dance curricula is strongly influenced by “the culture of rigor” (p. 48) which is seen as paramount in the Western world and which therefore influences the way people work and live. Dimon (2003) claims that if we try too hard, we are prevented from experimenting and discovering the very elements that make up a skill: “few people, when learning something new, want to stop and think about what they are doing, to experiment, to play with different approaches” (p. 18).

In the group lessons, instead of focus on repetitions, the key to altering habits was time to experiment through self-observation and inhibition. From the dance teachers’ perspective, the students’ ability to use inhibition when discovering an automatic reaction or habit is essential. Normally, when teaching big classes, the teacher is not able to correct every student individually; knowing that the students are able to correct themselves, or at least be able to recognize habits or incorrect use, is of great importance. Implementing pauses was one way of giving the students time to recognize useful sensory feedback and the possibility to inhibit automated responses. The pauses gave the students time to discover how their thoughts influenced their movements. Practicing in different tempi, with different effort levels, and with different foci was another way to discover automated responses, not in the purpose of performing mechanically correct, but to uncover the symbiotic processes of mind and body, making the subconscious conscious: discovering, in Damasio’s (2010) words, how “body and brain are engaged in a continuous interactive dance” (p. 96). Here is one example from one of the participants of how subconscious habits came to the surface:

I think I adopt more bad habits when I work in front of a mirror because I become so result-oriented. I am heading somewhere and it should look like this or that; I take the quickest route and don’t notice how it feels because I think, ok, it looks

kind of right, and then strange things can easily happen in my body ...I forget to think about the others in the room, the people around me — I lose that consciousness because I am only in myself.

This shows how the principles of AT, using observation and inhibition, were a tool to discover how the student reacted to the stimuli of a mirror. When the student discovered how strongly she reacted to the mirrors in the room, the student could work on inhibition and try to refuse to react in an automated way.

The problems concerning automation of a learned skill were challenged during this project and became a part of the teachers' discussions. There is a common perception among teachers within the field of musical theatre that one has to practice enough so that the way one sings and dances becomes established in one's muscle memory (Sadolin, 2006). As noted by Fuchs (2012), our procedural memory operates without being noticed, which to a certain extent is necessary, keeping us from becoming involved in an abundance of details (pp. 12–13). Obviously, one cannot be in the world thinking of how one carries out every little detail in every action one performs. Difficulties arise, however, when our automated implicit (procedural) memory becomes an "explicit object of our somatic consciousness" (Shusterman, 2009, p. 133). For example, this can be seen when learning a new skill, if our procedural memory is brought to the surface when experiencing back pain, if we are short of breath, or as shown here, when there are problems merging the skills of song and dance. The belief in automatic control and that unattended motor memory takes care of learned skills is very much alive. As Sadolin (2006) argues:

When one sings something enough times the nerves will remember that. This can be referred to as practicing into "muscle memory." From thereon, the muscles of the voice are used to doing just that and will automatically ensure that they do it again. (p. 10., authors' translation)

The key problem with this explanation is that it pays no attention to one's relationship to the environment (or to the continuous stimuli we receive from it). In our view, this is based on an instrument-driven view of the individual (Hagen et al., 2017), and situational memory (Fuchs, 2012) is not really taken into account. We argue that separating mental and physical teaching strategies bypasses, or at best, limits basic skills (such as inclusive awareness and self-discovery) for the musical theatre student. This view is strengthened as an outcome of this project; the students need increased knowledge of how they react to a stimulus during learning processes and in practice situations, but also *after* the learning process is considered finished. In the same vein, Shusterman (2009) said:

Learning is never over because not only there is room for further refinements and extensions of the acquired skill, but also because we so often lapse into bad habits of performance or face new conditions of the self (through injury, fatigue, growth, aging, and so on) and new environments in which we need to correct, relearn, and adjust our habits of spontaneous performance. (p.138)

Similarly, automatic control is an erroneous argument when it comes to the use of AT. One of the misconceptions about the technique is that after enough lessons, one is able to automatize the principles. It would be more appropriate to suggest that one's awareness is honed such that conscious choice is more available, implying an ongoing responsiveness that becomes more sensitive with time.

On the other hand, to change ingrained and inexpedient habits and to train and refine our awareness is not an easy task. We can easily be misled by our own physical sensations and feelings. One participant experienced this while working on his breathing in a dance class. He had a feeling that he was breathing "correctly", but when he saw himself in the mirror, he discovered that his sensations of "correct" were the opposite of what was happening:

Every time I breathed in, my back disappeared [*pulled in*] entirely, and when I breathed out my back went out. And then I thought to myself, shouldn't the opposite be happening? And I thought to myself: what is really going on? And when my back disappeared, I saw that my chest went like this when I breathed [*he holds a hand on his chest and raises it forward*].

This student's breathing felt right and normal to him, but the mirror exposed to him that he was doing quite the opposite of what he thought he was doing. Alexander (1932) referred to this phenomenon as *unreliable sensory appreciation*. Netti-Fiol (2006) elaborated on this phenomenon and explained that what feels natural and normal to the student is not always optimal: "We therefore cannot necessarily rely on our sense of feeling to change a habit ... awareness is the first step toward making change" (p. 79). As this example shows, the student's habits and unconscious way of reacting had to be brought to the surface before he could make a meaningful change.

Collaborative teaching contributed to a deeper understanding among the participants.

Interdisciplinary reflection and dialogue were two of the main intentions when we initiated this project. The outcome of this cooperative teaching enlightened and expanded the participating teachers' knowledge, not only in their respective fields, but also inter-subjectively (Engeström, 2010). In general, increased dialogue, both with the students and

among the colleagues was widening and deepening our knowledge in the field of musical theatre (Mourik, 2008).

In the preliminary interviews, the participants were asked to describe their experiences regarding teaching language and methodology in song and dance, and in which way(s) these corresponded to one another or were contradictory. One participant identified a particular challenge as “where you focus on your support and center.” Another described the idea of supporting the tone while singing: “Then I incorporate certain muscles and hold myself open . . . holding my chest and ribs open. In that way I don’t expel all the air.” He pointed towards a further contradiction:

It often feels kind of contradictory. One speaks of holding in the stomach in dancing—that you shouldn’t let it out, but to hold the ribs in. And to think that the ribs [*pointing at the front of his ribcage*] should pull together. While in singing I often think of them being allowed to go out. But they often say in dance that they should move, in a dynamic sense.

The students’ pre-existing understanding of the concept of “support” used in singing tuition complicated their processes of merging song and dance. One possible reason for this ambiguity is the traditional ways of controlling different parts of the breathing process (Hagen et al., 2017, p. 10) and the ways several singing teachers address the concept of good posture (Sadolin, 2006; Eken, 2014). This study revealed that the students participating were having trouble explaining the word “support”. Therefore, how a teacher’s verbal instructions are interpreted was also of great interest. Another participant had an interpretation of how to hold his ribs and upper body in dance classes:

I haven’t exactly learnt specifically that this should be held [*points to torso*], but I have arrived at such an interpretation. I think this is due to me having the impression that this should be held. That it should be “non-moveable” or “non-organic,” and that from here and down should be working [*points to hips*].

His interpretation of the dance teacher's words to “close the ribs” influenced the way he was using his body. His idea of dancing was synonymous with a held and closed upper body. This indeed influenced his performances, and singing teachers, theatre teachers, and dance teachers had all told him, during his years of study, that he was generally too “held” and “stiff”: “I have always heard the comment that ‘you have to work on that’ but have never really felt that I have any tools to solve it.”

A common pathway used to address what song and dance teachers see as “stiff” or “strained” performers is to ask them to be more spontaneous. According to the principles of AT, the problem with spontaneity is that if we act on top of unconscious habits, we continue to act in an automated way. As Shusterman (2009) claims, “to correct our bad habits we cannot simply rely on spontaneity, which, as the product of habit, is precisely part of the problem” (p. 135).

Being aware of which concepts confused the students provided a new premise in collaborative teaching: rethinking how we habitually tend to use some concepts in teaching, for example, “support”, “center,” or “to hold”, As singing and dance teachers, we have inhibited our habitual expressions, such as “use your support,” “anchor your body,” or “find your center.” This was rooted in an assurance that we wanted to explore the process rather than the end and that we shared the same ideas concerning the end result. The teachers encouraged the students to be aware of their own use, both mentally by asking questions like “What did you think about when you started? ” and “Where was your focus during the phrase?” and physically: “Did you notice that you lifted your right shoulder on that note?” and “Did you notice that you made yourself shorter at the end of the phrase?”. The purpose of asking these questions was to encourage the students to develop their vocabulary, to give themselves and each other constructive and precise feedback, and to not merely judge the performance as good or bad. The students were encouraged to participate in a dialogue together with the teachers who avoided presenting fixed answers.

In the beginning, the song and dance teachers’ new awareness of *not* using habitual sayings also made them reluctant, and in a way, limited and afraid of saying something wrong (Tjora, 2017). This is an obvious bias in this project. The song and dance teachers avoided conflicting words, and so they avoided conflicting moments in the room. One can argue that this consensus did not give us insight into potential conflicts of using different methods. It also took some time to develop a secure space for dialogue and exchange of knowledge, and after the first lesson, the singing teachers asked the AT teacher to be more active in terms of leading the teaching in the room. The reason for this was that his expertise in AT was newly acquired knowledge for both the dance teacher and the participating students.

As the project evolved, we saw that collaborative teaching enriched the involved teachers as well as the participating students, experiencing that “integrating with colleagues boosted the quality of the education as teachers grew together as a team” (Mourik, 2008, p. 218). Collaborative teaching gave the teachers new perspectives and useful experiences outside of our comfort zones and teaching habits. In general, the approach became more intuitive and relaxed, and all the teachers could trust their own expertise in the field. Having all the experts in the same room convinced the informants and teachers that all professional needs were taken care of. The AT teacher sometimes asked the dance teacher, “Is this the intention of the

choreography?” or “Does this way of thinking conflict with your thoughts around the song or dance aspects?” Engestrøm (2010) asks, “Is learning primarily a process that transmits and preserves culture or a process that transforms and creates culture?” (p. 2). By implementing collaborative teaching with song, dance, and AT, the outcome was an expansion of our own teaching. Different points of view enriched the understanding of each other’s fields, and we had the time and possibility to elaborate on the concepts and the language used in teaching song and dance. Zelm (2013) argues that peer learning is a skill and that it is not only the students who need to learn it: “teachers need to develop skills in peer learning themselves in order to guide students in peer learning” (p. 181). Thus, the group lessons provided a learning arena for the teachers as well, and the project has developed our view of ourselves as facilitators of learning rather than as ‘masters’. The atmosphere in the group developed during the project from searching, when both teachers and students were trying to find a form, to a secure and safe atmosphere at the end of the project.

Concluding Thoughts

This study investigated how the principles of AT can serve as a platform in the setting of collaborative teaching. One may think of it as a common faculty that can serve to integrate teaching modalities. Melton (2012) advocates for the integration of the fields of song and dance and suggested the “possibility of a new training paradigm” (p. 1). This pilot study provided useful insights into what such a training paradigm might contain. Our experiences show that students need to be trained in the domain of embodied cognition and embodied learning, and thus be able to change their own habits that limit their learning processes and to refine their ability to practice in dance, song, and the combination of the two. In our view, the ideas inherent in AT offer an integrative approach to the knowledge of embodied cognition, indispensable to the interdisciplinary nature of musical theatre education. By challenging traditional assumptions and habits, AT creates a way for students to explore contradictions in the training in different disciplines. This might contribute to a change in the student–master relationship, enabling the students to take more responsibility in their own learning and making them less dependent on the teacher. This study encouraged the teacher group to develop and expand the collaborative teaching settings in the field of musical theatre as we know it. Our hope is that further research can develop and investigate this model in greater detail and with an enlarged student and teacher base, so as to determine exactly how collaborative teaching combined with an active and integrated use of embodied cognition and learning can contribute to learning processes in the field of musical theatre.

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International Journal of Education & the Arts

<http://IJEa.org>

ISSN: 1529-8094

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