

# The somatic practice of intentional rest in dance education – preliminary steps towards a method of study

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'Silence is the strength of our interior life.'  
(Terry Tempest Williams)

## Abstract

*Every performing art has its caesura – a resting pause – a potent stillness in the rhythmic flow of action. For western contemporary dance, stillness is a powerful aesthetic tool. Far less understood are the physiological – and behavioural – benefits of rest. While rest intervals routinely are prescribed in sports science to promote physiological recovery and improve performance, such protocols are unknown in dance. Somatic approaches ('somatics') purposely embed intervals of stillness and rest for active listening and reflection. This kind of intentional reduction in action alters typical space-time-effort values of a dance technique class, shifting attention to an array of kinaesthetic qualities, thoughts and feelings. While dance customarily relegates somatics to a wellness role, the larger behavioural implications of intentional rest within dance pedagogy merit further investigation. Although the purposes are not fully clarified, 'intentional rest' potentially allows a deeper level of embodied knowledge to surface and be directed towards self-regulation and change. This article addresses the somatic function of intentional rest within the context of dance training. The author provides an overview of the scientific evidence substantiating rest. Further, the author opens an inquiry into the behavioural values of intentional rest as gleaned from written reflections of Master's degree dance students in a seminar on somatics. These narratives appear to advance not only with those benefits advocated by sports science, but also psychophysical embodiment and personal autonomy, values essential to becoming a dance artist.*

## Keywords

somatic(s) education  
rest  
intention  
first person  
reflexivity  
modern dance

## Introduction

Since ancient times, people have ritualized the rhythms of everyday life by balancing physical activity with rest. From Ecclesiastes comes the phrase, 'a time to rend and a time to sew [...] [And] a time to keep silence ...'. In a contemporary light, the art and science of human movement are built upon rhythmic cycles of body weight loading and unloading. As we continue to evolve as 'cyborgs' (Haraway 1991), the art of rest may be an essential ingredient in our ability to adapt and remain healthy and productive, and still enjoy life (Mednick and Ehrman 2006).

Among the conversations in dance education – theoretical or practical – discussions on the value(s) of rest are elusive. Despite more than four decades of influence of somatic education on primarily modern dance technique pedagogy, dance educators still remain sceptical of the value ascribed to ‘intentional rest’ (author’s term) within somatics. This article revisits the value of the somatic practice of intentional rest in dance training through an evidence-based review of the science of rest. Further, the article is informed by selections from written responses of Master’s degree dance students to guided questions and assignments in a seminar on somatics over the last five years. The dancers’ voices reveal that intentional rest is – like dance – a rigorous, disciplined, empowering practice. Through tracking these narratives, the author takes preliminary steps towards defining key concepts of intentional rest within first-person methodology.

### **Dance and somatic pedagogy – convergences and divergences**

Modern dance and somatics share a common bond: the intentional exploration of movement as a primary source of embodied knowledge and a catalyst for personal and professional artistic growth and the pursuit of personal freedom (Antilla 2004). This shared value issues in part from a common source: the feeling of the body in stillness and in movement which gives rise to self-realization, body expressivity and art (Behnke 2007). Dance and somatics optimize and refine movement through augmenting kinaesthetic sensation. The two fields part ways, however, over one main philosophical and pedagogical emphasis: ‘sensory authority’ (Green 2002a: 113), the primacy given to sensory awareness and its role in shaping the dancing body. Sensory authority emerges from in-depth investigation of sensory awareness and its truthful, uncensored expression. Sensory awareness is the direct focus on some specific sensory aspect (including kinaesthesia) whose source is the inner and outer bodily environment. A source of distinct, complex phenomenal data, sensory awareness is one of the five most common forms of inner experience, inclusive of inner speech, inner seeing, feelings and un-symbolized thinking (Hurlburt, Heavey and Bensaheb 2009: 231). Readily accessible, sensory awareness is the ‘felt’ and intimate dimension of experience (Gendlin 1999). Bringing sensory awareness to consciousness renders the implicit explicit.

Traditional modern dance pedagogy has tended to emphasize the ‘motor’ end of the sensorimotor continuum, that is, the learning of traditional and novel motor vocabularies. Honing the kinaesthetic sense is more of an *indicator* of motor skill, rather than a primary agent in *learning* the motor skill. This pedagogical emphasis on the motoric elements of movement has tended to ignore (and even suppress) the expression of inner voices in service to the rigorous physical pursuit of the desired aesthetic (Johnson 2006; Lakes 2005). While pedagogical approaches to modern dance education have changed considerably over the years (Stinson, Blumenfield-Jones and Van Dyke 1992; Shapiro 1998), the use of somatic reflection is rarely the principal aim within dance technique or choreography, nor is it given substantial support (Leijen, Lam and Robert-Jan Simons 2007).

A somatic learning environment places sensory awareness in the foreground (Batson 1990). Cultivating sensitivity (Hanlon-Johnson 1986/87) and sense-ability through awareness are valued over any movement style

or outcome. Somatic approaches offer a myriad of intentional, reflective practices which distinguish sentient (felt), embodied knowledge as that which is gained 'through' the body, rather than being merely 'of' the body (Sellars-Young 1998: 174). Somatic practices promote 'internal authority' (Green 2002b: 115) by valuing the uniqueness of each individual's experience in finding his or her own path and process of embodiment. Dance, too, values the uniqueness of the dancer. Both somatics and dance provide a place to examine the limitations and possibilities of the physical body within its habitus (Wellard, Pickard and Bailey 2007; Leijen, Lam and Robert-Jan Simons 2007). What differs is their means.

One specific pedagogical distinction of somatic education lies in its unique use of intentional rest. Every somatic practice has a resting phase – an intentional pause, a moment of augmented silence. This phase provides an essential space within the somatic learning environment for listening, and further – for *hearing* – the messages received from body movement, touch, voice and other modalities (Batson and Schwartz 2007). Rest suggests a stopping, or a break, a pause, in the flow of ongoing activity or action. The stop creates a space, an open and existential field of attention wherein a number of choices can be made: stop altogether, investigate the 'empty' (non-doing or activity-reduced) moment for clues or choose to do something else. The purposes of intentional rest appear multiple and complex. After nearly 40 years of somatic investment within dance, the use of intentional rest merits further investigation and clarification.

When the content reflected on is the moving body itself (Green 2002b), distinct forms of knowing arise, including openness and agility in constructing new knowledge and fostering empowerment through changing habitual reactions to dominant personal, social and cultural ideologies (Kerka 2002; Gustafson 1999). In movement-based somatic practices, however, both movement *and* stillness are potent phases of embodied learning and change. The process consists less in accumulating new knowledge than in stripping away the knowledge within the habitus that prevents us from entering more deeply into this contact. A letting go of habitual use of space-time, often a consequence of slowing down or stopping action, enables the subtraction of encumbering elements of self-knowledge (Petitmengin 2009: 11).

Somatics does not stand alone as an approach to exploring the internal landscape of embodied self-regulation (Hanna 1976). Numerous pragmatic practices from psychology, phenomenology and religion offer a large spectrum of contemplative to expressive (Varela and Shear 1999). Among movement-based practices, however, well over 100 exist (Knaster 1996), and the list is growing with various hybridized and synthetic forms surfacing worldwide. Yet, integrating these practices into dance training has taken time, both to allow for shifts in traditional thinking as well as scientific validation.

## **Rest and dance science**

In dance, the physiological and behavioural values and benefits of intentional rest are far from understood. A review of scientific research on rest helps frame the topic. When it comes to traditional dance training, an ideology of rigorous and relentless physicality has prevailed. In western

culture vestiges of a strong puritanical work ethic still dominate, influencing how bodies control themselves, not only among the general population (Messing et al. 2005; Foucault 1988), but also in the arts (Markula 2004). Dancers must prove themselves worthy by hard, unflagging physical effort and repetition well beyond the point of fatigue. Rest carries the negative connotation of lack of dedication or commitment to being an artist (Lakes 2005). Even when deemed physiologically necessary to maintain musculoskeletal health and wellness and avoid burnout (Koutadakis 2000), rest is an oxymoron, a last resort that reminds us that our biological bodies are, after all, merely human.

The conditions for repetitive practice need to be carefully evaluated. Where do physical educators derive the rationale for relentless practice? The 'power law of practice' (Newell and Rosenbloom 1981) suggests that supra-normal numbers of hours of repetitive practice are needed to build skill. But does skilled performance evolve solely from sheer repetition? And, are there negative consequences to repetition that offset the positive effects of performance enhancement (Ericsson, Drampe and Tesch-Rommer 1993)? Repetitive practice without adequate rest is implicated in the cause of overuse injuries in dance (Shan 2005; Batson 2007). Yet, research supporting the testing of rest-to-activity ratios in dance essentially is non-existent. A recent evidence-based textbook on dance and motor learning does not even broach the subject of the practice conditions of rest because the evidence simply is not there (Kimmerle and Cote-Laurence 2003).

Evidence from sports and exercise science and motor learning on the other hand, substantiates multiple benefits of intentional rest for health and performance. Athletes routinely balance the volume and intensity of work. Periodization is a precise science in sports training where evaluation is ongoing of the physical, mental and emotional effects of over- and under-training (Bompa 1999). Activity-to-rest ratios of various durations have been defined for a variety of sports activities. Exercise prescriptions exist for the most optimal form and rate of reduction of training load (e.g. step, linear or exponential training). Training durations, both lengthy (seasonal tapered practice) and brief (interval training) enhance overall health and skill (Kreider, Fry and O'Toole, 1998; Handford et al. 1997). The benefits of rest for physiological recovery from local and central muscle fatigue are well documented (Taylor 2008). These benefits are retroactive, i.e. recovery of local muscular metabolism and cardiovascular system adaptation induces a training effect.

The benefits of rest also are *proactive*. A substantive and compelling body of evidence from motor learning also suggests that embedding rest intervals within physical practice aids in motor skill acquisition, learning and performance, and impacts positively on psychological well-being (Kreider, Fry and O'Toole 1998; Schmidt and Lee 1999). 'Distributed practice' (Schmidt and Lee 1999: 293) is a well-known protocol in sports where the resting phase is at least equal to or longer than the activity phase. Distributed practice appears to have the edge over continuous practice in acquisition, refinement and retention of motor skills (Schmidt and Lee 1999). Rest intervals as short as one second (Bock, Thomas and Grigorova 2004) or as long as eight hours have been shown to enhance

motor learning (Huber et al. 2004). A full night's sleep appears particularly beneficial after performing long movement sequences with high attentional and perceptual demands (Walker et al. 2002).

Rest also impacts positively on brain structure and function. Advances in imaging technology have helped make the learning brain accessible to researchers. Rest stimulates neuroplastic processes leading to topographic changes in sensorimotor brain regions (Sukel 2007), including those representing the body image/schema (Gallagher 2005). These dynamic 'maps' underlie the sense of body ownership and agency (Gallagher 2005). Finally, seven decades of sports science research in mental rehearsal (visualization of motor imagery) have shown that mental practice activates the same neurons in the brain as actual physical execution (Decety 1996), enabling practice without fatigue. Combining mental practice of motor imagery with physical practice results in greater improvements in motor performance than with physical practice alone, both physically and psychologically (Feltz, Landers and Becker 1988).

While dance science seeks to distinguish itself from sports and exercise science (Nemecek and Chatfield 2007), somatics, too, needs to stand alone as a science in its own right (Hanna 1976; Green 2008). Since the 1970s, somatics has sought to identify itself as a 'human science' (Hanna 1976: 31; Behnke 2008), though the field has remained largely outside of orthodox scientific investigation for decades (Fortin 1998). Over the last quarter-century, methodologies for first-person investigation (Varela and Shear 1999) have emerged from a confluence of multidisciplinary research into embodied behaviour (Green 2007; Clark 2009). Scientific support for somatics has come from a blend of theories from phenomenology, neuroscience and biology as well as from the many offshoots in 'reflective/reflexive' practice methodology within the social sciences (Schon 1983; Alversson and Skoldberg 2009). The broad new science of 'embodiment' embraces intentional consciousness, self-regulation and self-control (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991; Lieberman 2007, 2003), all functions of the living soma.

### **The uses of rest in somatics**

Within this field of embodiment, somatics has charted a unique path (Sheets-Johnstone 2009; Fortin 1998). Every somatic approach offers some degree of intentional, augmented rest where activity is balanced by a non-doing phase. The pause or rest is purposeful to offer a time of active listening. Sense-ability is best cultivated when there is ample time for sensory (stimulus) detection, observation, reflection and integration. During intentional rest, an array of kinaesthetic qualities can surface in relatively effortless contexts of physical non-doing. The resting period alters the usual space-time-effort values and fosters a more reflective learning context. Allowing for a space between one stimulus and another is a potent interval. Varied durations of silence and non-doing (or minimization of effort) allow movement to emerge from another source – from awareness of sensations arising from within – rather than movement copied, mimicked or monitored by mirrors. The primacy of sensory awareness (sensing) and of refining sensations while minimizing physical 'doing', disturbs the body from its common habitus (Buchanan and Ulrich 2001) and opens

up new, unfamiliar territory (e.g. movement potential). In a quiet, reflective field of open attention, busy thoughts to quiet down, another deeper receptivity to novel sensations arises. Building a vocabulary for the novel sensations of one's own experience (locating, clarifying and differentiating experiences) fosters learning. The process of becoming aware through the comparative experience of body movement and stillness opens the possibility for reorganization of the brain (Blakeslee and Blakeslee 2007) with subsequent flexibility in the self-image and its functional options (Feldenkrais 1972). At a minimum, focused, sensory awareness within an open field of rest enables the emergence of an inkling of detectable differences in sensation ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just-noticeable\\_difference](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just-noticeable_difference)). When the brain detects novelty, it is the stimulus for change (Buchanan and Ulrich 2001).

The shift in body image is not just a neurological phenomenon, however. Clarifying and differentiating the body image/schema engenders a greater sense of embodiment and personal autonomy – key elements in becoming a dance artist. Somatic practices reveal behavioural outcomes that have (and go beyond) scientific value (Juhan 1987). Somatic philosopher Elizabeth Behnke notes that we are constantly 'making a body', are in the 'dynamic process of bodying' (Behnke 1997: 184), even at rest. What is explicit (visually seen and communicated) masks the implicit body, the 'tacit "choreography"' of everyday life (Behnke 1997: 181). Underneath the surface body shaping lies covert kinaesthetic neuromuscular patterns expressed (relentlessly) as a repertoire of micro-movements. These micro-movements include subtle shifts of weight, breathing, body postures and body attitudes. These covert patterns persist even when larger movements are performed or not, acting on the bigger body narrative that is happening throughout the day, a kind of urtext underneath a variety of socially and culturally conditioned texts of who we are. The pattern can carry the residue of previous training (e.g. 'Lengthen your back'), criticisms received by parents or peers (e.g. 'Pull your shoulders back'), cultural artefacts (a hat, mobile phone, or shoes), or gender or other social content ('Walk gracefully like a lady') (Behnke 1997: 189).

### **Resting variations**

Rest usually implies a complete stop in which the dancer does no physical movement, but it is more. In rest, physical movement ceases, but the intention to continue moving might still exist. Rest can also be accompanied by many forms of mental and perceptual monitoring of sensory and other data. In the ancient somatic practice of Hatha Yoga, for example, 'Svasana' (the corpse pose) involves several minutes of non-conscious, non-directed supine lying interspersed between vigorous asanas. Svasana is designed to empty the mind and promote a meditative state in which the body-mind moves towards physiological restoration, autonomic regulation and mental calm (Coulter 2001: 262). Many other options of instances of rest exist in the somatic archive in terms of the nature, purpose, characteristics, frequency, duration and phenomenological emphasis. Some of the choices for intentional rest familiar to dancers include (but are not limited to): (1) stopping activity completely and stabilizing the body from needing to support itself or move (sitting on a chair or lying

down). This constitutes true and complete rest if it is free of ongoing conscious attention to task, awareness or reflection of self, or cognitive or proprioceptive guidance or direction (much like going to sleep); (2) stopping to quieten the busy mind and attend to physiological phenomena (e.g. breathing); (3) stopping to attend to arising sensations (open-ended inquiry); (4) stopping to attend to arising sensations that illuminate patterns of neuromuscular effort that might bias the next move (as in the Alexander Technique); (5) stopping to compare pre-movement with post-movement feedback or simply doing nothing (as in the Feldenkrais Method®); and (6) deliberately assuming a resting posture to direct mental thoughts and sensations in the absence of any physical effort or intent to move in order to alter neuromuscular patterns within the body (Ideokinesis).

The somatic milieu is replete with personal testimonies of body-mind-spirit epiphanies that arise from slowing down, listening and doing less (entering into states of non-doing and resting). Nonetheless, the characteristics of rest have not been clarified within the field. Each somatic practice offers a perspective on rest that is complex and varied. Among somatic approaches to rest perhaps one of the most well known among dancers is the use of constructive rest from Ideokinesis (Sweigard 1974). Ideokinesis is what neuroscientists call 'mental practice of motor imagery' (Jackson et al. 2001: 1133). Ideokinesis has propagated throughout multiple dance curricula through the work of Lulu Sweigard who coined the term (Sweigard 1974), and descendants Irene Dowd (1999), Barbara Clark (Matt 1993), Andre Bernard (Bernard, Stricker and Steinmuller 2006) and others. The concept of using visualization at rest to reprogramme maladaptive neuromuscular patterns underlying postural alignment and movement patterns was revolutionary in its time (Sweigard 1974). For this process, Sweigard standardized the 'constructive rest position', a hook-lying position in which most joints are placed in anatomical neutral to minimize the effects of movement forces on the body (Sweigard 1974: 215). The rest is 'constructive' in that the brain can change its patterns of neural activation through non-doing (imagined action causes low-level activation of neurons for the exact same muscles needed to execute the action physically). Perhaps the best substantiated scientifically of the resting approaches (Feltz, Landers and Becker 1988; Suinn 2006), Ideokinesis is a non-physical (non-force-generating) approach that over time primes neural pathways for improved neuromuscular control. Constructive rest, while a form of non-doing, is a process in which focused mental attention is explicitly directed over a prolonged course of time (20 minutes).

Alternatively, rather than directing the resting phase from the outset, dancers can choose consciously to track newly arriving movement feedback (and/or other physiological feedback). Dancers can respond to and/or direct the feedback or not, being a witness to the sensations that arise or actually manipulating them. An example might be either continuing to witness and follow a feeling of lengthening in the muscles without intending to alter the event, or conversely, intentionally directing that lengthening mentally towards shaping another posture or movement. Founder of Continuum Movement Emilie Conrad employs a sustained period (a Continuum 'dive') of vocalizing (sounding) and listening. The mover focuses on directing

guided vocalized sounds through the body to enliven the tissue (Conrad 2007). Brief periods of ad lib sounding are followed by longer periods of suspended waiting (called 'open attention') in which the mover observes the changing state of tissue (without adding physical effort or mental direction) and consciously follows (perceptually tracks) the micro-movements emerging within the tissue layers. This process of sounding and listening in a state of open attention stimulates and illuminates pathways of tissue fluidity (Conrad 2007: 4–7). The mover can observe what information arrives at the level of the tissues and allow that information to guide the next phase of movement. Similarly, in Body-Mind Centering, an environment of allowing and 'yielding' in response to movement sets the stage for cellular communication in a field of safety, i.e. one of acceptance, non-judgement and non-imposition of will on the authenticity of somatic information arising in the moment. 'Stillness is fluid awareness: a sense of timeless, comfort, presence, rest, home base' (Bainbridge-Cohen, 2009: 15).

The Alexander Technique offers a completely different resting paradigm. Pausing or stopping in the case of F.M. Alexander's concept of inhibition implies a more active use of awareness in everyday activity (Alexander 1923). Inhibition is both the physiological and cognitive coordinating agent of the nervous system, essentially creating balance between thought and action to avoid hypo- or hyperactive states (Nigg 2001). In the Alexander Technique, the use of inhibition is not used for the purpose of physiological restoration, meditative focus or for transformation of tissue quality. What F.M. Alexander called 'inhibition' involves a process whereby conscious awareness can be augmented to notice the onset of maladaptive conditioned reflexes, which can be prevented. Postural reactions are triggered by the intent to move and at the moment of movement initiation, in the critical milliseconds right before action. These appear as neuromuscular reflex patterns that ready the whole body for movement. These patterns provide optimal support for movement or not. The pause helps the dancer recognize and prevent unwanted reflex neuromuscular patterns that interfere with good postural and movement support. In the moment of awareness, the dancer can inhibit his or her tendency to do the habitual (already 'primed' but maladaptive motor programme). Stopping the 'wrong' pattern from being triggered opens a space for self-organizing a more optimal coordination (Alexander 1923). Unlike Ideokinesis, the Alexander Technique is an indirect method of motor programming where directed mental attention emphasizes thinking without the mediation of a visual image. F.M. Alexander's 'directives' (e.g. 'Let the head move forward and up') carry a kinaesthetic valence that seems similar to visual imagery. The directive is designed, however, to stimulate the development of a kinaesthetic sensation of coherent energy moving upwards through the body and into space, as opposed to balanced muscle activation programmed by the visual image of a string out of the top of the head (Sweigard 1974).

Rest also can act as another kind of change agent in perturbing habitual movement behaviours (Buchanan and Ulrich 2001). Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lessons promote improved self-organization and autonomy through asking the dancer to attend to movement feedback both during the doing and the resting phases. A resting phase of at least thirty seconds to one minute is interspersed between two

or three minutes of verbally guided movement. This resting period allegedly is where the 'learning' occurs (Feldenkrais 1964). Allowing this essential resting phase frees the mover from attending to extensive and intricate information delivered during guided ATM lessons and to integrate kinaesthetic feedback from movement. In this way, the mover is given time to release reactive patterns, acknowledge new movement options and consolidate new learning.

## **Towards a method of investigation**

For over thirty years, the author has been working towards a theoretical synthesis of quantitative scientific investigation and somatics. Trained not only in multiple styles of contemporary and ethnic dance, but also in empirical science (anatomy, kinesiology, neuroscience and rehabilitation medicine) and several somatic approaches, linking third-person empiricism with first-person knowledge has been a passion. The question of how somatic experience could be harnessed for artistic creativity and expressiveness within dance has loomed large. Although advocated as a means to integrate somatics into the realm of science (Varela 1996), linking the phenomenological back to empirical science has been challenging, to say the least. Free exploration of the soma with or without scientific validation is essential in dance, and the author has frequently looked through both lenses for clues to replicable teaching material. Over the last five years, the author taught a brief, six-week seminar course in somatics for Master's degree dance students. Here was an opportunity to develop research questions and begin to hone a reflective/reflexive (Alversson and Skoldberg 2009) method for understanding intentional rest. While the terms 'reflective' and 'reflexive' can be used relatively interchangeably (Darling 1998), reflexive practice suggests a more active, contextual investigation, enabling the student to move from quiet introspection to the larger context of interaction, conflict resolution and choice (Rothman 1997: 35). Reflexivity within this context means having the capacity to recognize unexamined reactions to external stimuli in a timely way and to delay instinctive reactions before responding with automatic (knee-jerk) reactions (Rothman 1997). Reflexive practice demands active reflection and an in-depth self-analysis and critique that support sustained growth and development beyond the self (Kenway and McLeod 2004).

Such practice needs to be dynamic and fluid, allowing for both student and teacher to be in empathetic collaboration (Dupuis 1999). The dancers were engaged in a highly scheduled, busy degree programme. It was important to view their participation within this context in order to promote an environment of sensitivity, empathy and discipline that potentially could serve a higher goal (in this case, to serve aesthetic expression in dance). In this way, somatic reflection was viewed not so much as a first-person 'perspective', suggesting a distant vantage point, but rather a process of bodily interaction with the environment (Gendlin 2009: 348). The brief six-week introductory course barely provided enough time to scratch the somatic surface. Embodied knowledge needs time and intensity of training to understand how to access internal cues (Vermersch 2009). A first-time phenomenal experience is like a trace or 'first sketch' (Varela and Shear 1999: 7) that sets in motion processes that render deeper meaning on reflection.

Descriptions for this more 'pre-reflective' phase of experience (Stern 2009: 307) exist in the psychotherapeutic literature, including Gendlin's 'felt sense' (Gendlin 2007), Petitmengin's 'felt meaning' (Petitmengin-Peugeot 1999), Damasio's 'background feelings' (Damasio 1999) and Stern's 'vitality affects' (Stern 1985). These feelings are gestalts, wholes in which the experience of force, time, space, intention, effort, personal history and current social conditions and contexts play a huge role in allowing the process (Stern 2009: 310). The non-verbal reflexive experience is at first corporeal, sensorimotor or affective, and language may take time to surface (Stern 2009). Nonetheless, in the short time together, illuminating vocabulary, concepts and inquiry emerged.

What follows is a description of the author's initial steps at investigation using guided assignments from a general seminar on somatic education in a dance degree programme. For the majority of the dancers coming into the course, it was an opportunity to reflect on somatic experience perhaps for the first time. While most dancers were advanced technically, few came to the programme with training in somatics, except perhaps with some experience in mindful approaches to Pilates and various forms of yoga. The course offered an oasis of calm in the midst of a very stimulating and demanding degree programme. A primary aim was to create an environment in which dancers could feel safe and accepting, so as to elicit fresh, unedited responses to less performative movement experiences. Within this environment, dancers ideally could begin to identify and put unedited words to their experience. Many of the dancers kindly gave permission to use confidential material (removed of personal identifiers). Excerpts from their written narrative responses to various assignments below provide insight into the novelty, nature and complexity of reflecting on intentional rest.

### **Assignments**

Before the class began, the dancers received an e-mailed questionnaire inviting them to describe their previous experience with somatic approaches. They were asked to define somatics and to explain its purpose, both personally and professionally. Most considered somatics to be a set of body-based movement practices that had limited use in dance training as well as personally (in the larger scope of *being* a dancer). Many dancers relegated this kind of education to the category of 'therapy', a safe environment used to recover from the relentlessness of dance training, and not as something constituting a potential source of knowledge for improving technique and performance. These thoughts were reflected in written comparisons and contrasts in which dance was considered more performative, while somatics more supportive:

- 'Dance emphasizes form, specified timing over the indetermination of sensed execution.'
- 'Somatics is not intended for show, somatics seems to be a narrower category in itself, while dance is a much larger term encompassing more (and very different) subcategories.'
- 'Somatics aims to "restore" the body. Dance (while it can serve as a sort of therapy) does not claim to do the same.'

- 'I think of the primary intention of somatics as more for me and my bodily health. My primary intention for dance usually not only is my health.'
- 'Dance = no boundary, rigor, risk-taking, performative. Somatics = ritual, boundary.'

Given the brevity of working class time, teaching was limited to introducing basic body awareness through the skeleton. Bone was a friendly and accessible place to begin. Focusing on bone also readily reduced muscular effort. Dancers were guided through exploratory movement activities that emphasized initiating from various bones to discover economy, ease, efficiency, groundedness and other organic or mechanical qualities. These movement explorations were counterbalanced by various intervals of silence – pausing and listening to feedback so that meaning could emerge for each dancer independently. Quieting the busy mind by prolonged periods of resting, body scanning and other restful somatic techniques were designed to prepare the body-mind for the emergence of inner sensations, lively focused attention and renewed energy. In these intervals, dancers could begin to make sense of sensory feedback (e.g. recognizing degrees of habitual muscular holding or distinguishing weight from tension). The simplicity of sensory awareness also helped the dancers understand the basics of self-regulatory (self-care) processes in modulating tension or other body-mind phenomena. Various durations of pausing and resting were embedded within the context of the different somatic practices. Dancers learned the difference between a brief, momentary 'inhibitory' pause (Alexander Technique), a longer movement feedback pause (Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement), and a prolonged (20-minute) motor programming phase (Ideokinesis). Each week, dancers received an assignment with guidelines for reflective practice based on explorations from class. A template was developed (Batson and Ginsberg 2006) to record their responses either verbally or graphically (especially for those whose primary language was not English).

The first assignment included finding a period in the day to practice restful reflection and to explore three resting postures (one sitting, one standing, one lying down) (See appendix for first assignment). In each assignment, dancers were invited to describe their sensations, feelings and emotions that issued from three separate practice periods during the week. Students were encouraged to seek true rest, being mindful of competing sensations and feelings such as rushing or ruminating.

Questions were provided to guide the beginning student, including:

- Do you embed active, constructive, focused periods of rest in your day? In your dancing? In your teaching? If so, how?
- How does your body-mind respond (muscle responses, emotions or feelings, mental states) to the command to rest in three different postures – standing, sitting and lying down? Give an example of each. Describe the global shift of the body-mind as you go from activity to rest.
- When you rest, can you quiet your mind fully (empty your mind) without adding other forms of deliberate mental 'programming' (e.g. following your breath or 'lengthening' your muscles)?

## The dancers speak

How does one actually become self-aware of the potential phenomenological import of rest? Initial responses to internal body access often are expressed as a ‘shedding’ (author’s term) of distractive elements in one’s consciousness. This first involves a process of letting go and allowing enough time and space to support the emergence of uncontrived awareness (Stern 2009). The approach to entering into the process employed in the class shared features similar to other pragmatic practices (Varela and Shear 1999).

- Stepping back from day-to-day perception or experience – suspending attending to events in the typical spatial and temporal frame of existence.
- Quieting the busy mind (Vineyard 2007) – taking a moment to slow down and focus awareness to the inner narrative.
- Shifting focused awareness from world to self (redirection inward).
- Inhibiting interferences. This complex process primarily involves redirecting thoughts away from ‘achievement’ (trying to do the ‘right’ thing, striving to do a movement, to give it shape and definition, before being ‘led’ by the senses).
- Lowering the physical forces of movement in the early stages to enhance sensibility, as the feeling of effort is not a measure of the work done, but an expression of the degree of *organization* of the effort (Feldenkrais 1964: 79) (italics Batson’s).
- Saturating tissue with awareness, during and after movement feedback.
- Sustaining attention, allowing for development and processing of smaller and more intricate detail.

Dancers encountered a number of impediments to this first assignment around resting. These responses are not uncommon as the dancer goes from moving from more externally referenced sources of input (which tell the dancer *what* to do) to internal ones (which reveal through the dancer’s own experience *how* to do) (Stinson, Blumenfeld-Jones and Van Dyke 1992). One of the hardest aspects of this process for the newcomer was learning to sustain attention (for up to 20 minutes, for example), while simultaneously suspending the habitual type of mental activity (Varela and Shear 1999). First, on the spectrum of mental orientation and alertness, dancers either remained fully alert, unable to let go to any degree and allow themselves or rest, or they were exhausted and falling asleep. Dancers found it hard to do ‘nothing’ – to allow a state of empty, non-programmed activity: ‘My mind never truly “quiets”. I don’t ever “empty my mind of thoughts” but if I focus on Alexander (Technique) directions, and breathing, then I can stay in my body and not whirling around in my day and my life.’

Responses expressed concerns or struggles around elements of personal ownership and agency, such as acceptance, confidence and self-efficacy. Initial responses to assignments were met with surprise, bewilderment, fascination, frustration and annoyance. Thoughts and feelings expressed seemed to imply that there was nothing noteworthy to observe or that there was nothing of (meta)physical benefit. Others implied that their experience was in

some way unworthy of investigation or not trustworthy. Finding nuanced vocabulary for somatic experiences was challenging. Responses spanned a wide range, including feelings of excessive tension, distractibility, irritability, nervousness and exhaustion. The most accessible term for describing the state of coming into quiet pausing and reflecting was 'relaxing'. When given permission to rest in three different resting postures of their choice, dancers struggled with the time needed to 'relax', or 'let go', realizing how 'exhausted' they were. Many struggled with slowing down the racing 'monkey mind' (as one student called it) which continued to perseverate on class combinations or which jumped from one thought to another. For some, time collapsed so that their sensations, thoughts or feelings were elusive; for others, the time frame seemed endless, so that it became 'work' to stay in the position. Several of the dancers timed themselves for 20 minutes. Others watched the clock.

Since many dancers were acquainted with yoga, the corpse pose was one anchoring experience for coming into a more relaxing, restful, reflective state. While breathing in the corpse pose helped deepen the state of relaxation, many dancers had to 'fight the feeling' of wanting to get up and get busy, or were disturbed by the amount of residual tension lodged in various parts of their body (neck, back, etc.) that they were unable to relax voluntarily:

'I am aware that I tend to go and go until I wear out. It is very difficult for me to imagine work like this where you rest periodically in a very concentrated manner. I am reminded of my yoga classes in India where the teacher had us lie in corpse pose between every asana and it felt like I was stopping and starting too much and this sort of irritated me. After about 8 minutes of rest I felt antsy and kept looking at the clock. I could not believe that I hadn't been resting a full 10 minutes yet. I started to explore the roof of my mouth with my tongue [...] Towards the end of 15 minutes I started to feel very sleepy and thought that I might doze off, which is unlike me. I never fall asleep without reading or something like that.'

When given the chance to slow down to focus on movement feedback, some dancers were overcome by anxiety and guilt because they were not working hard enough or were taking time for themselves: '[I feel I] must feel pain in order to believe I had done anything of value in class', or, 'In lying down, I reflected on my entire week of classes and realized how exhausted I was. My mind wandered to my family and I got a little emotional (not true, I got very emotional). I felt a huge amount of sadness come over me and guilt.'

Another phenomenon was self-correcting. As soon as there was conscious recognition of muscular holding in various regions (e.g. hip joints), dancers would try to move away from this disturbing feeling and try to rectify (correct) the situation by thinking about releasing, relaxing or they would simply start moving. Instead of really resting (a non-doing state), dancers still were 'practising' corrective self-talk: 'releasing' select muscles, 'tracking [their] breathing', etc. This is not true rest or non-doing. Such corrections actually interfered with the potential to explore and make use of the exercise as a platform for body learning:

'I realized that I rarely rest my body fully. I am usually doing some kind of direction or inhibition, which is also, of course, very useful, but not the

same as rest. I became curious about what bodily rest is. Is it actually mental rest as regards to directing the body? [...] Later, while studying for another class, I noticed that I get very uncomfortable sitting for long periods and that my usual way to deal with uncomfortableness [*sic*] is to move or to inhibit, both of which are useful, but I practiced instead with taking periods where I would rest my body without changing its position, which is a curious thing. Again, it seemed like the resting was a ceasing of mental agitation.'

Rather than approaching the material with a playful spirit of exploration, many dancers found the assignments burdensome and upsetting. Few were able to find the resting postures a source of comfort, support or pleasure, or a place to explore connectedness, tissue qualities or other physiological phenomena, even breathing. The threshold for distraction appeared to peak in around the second week. In this week, their second assignment guided them in standing for 20 minutes in three separate contexts. Steve Paxton describes a lesson in the act of standing, approaching it as an improvisatory 'small dance' (Paxton 2009). Steve Paxton offers an eloquent description of this playful exploration of standing, offering explicit guidelines for sensory exploration for increasing embodied knowledge of gravity, weight, tension, connection, etc. Responses revealed various levels of discomfort and dis-ease. With little history in somatic practices that could provide bodily ease and support, dancers found themselves butting up against a lack of understanding in how best to utilize these practices. This, coupled with pain, alignment imbalances, physical exhaustion and mental information overload, made this assignment nearly impossible to complete. At the end of the three practice sessions in standing, dancers were asked for a culminating response on their response templates. The assignment was met with varying degrees of exasperation, leaving little room for somatic inquiry ('I think standing for 20 minutes is not for me!').

Only dancers with training in somatic practices or release work were able to enjoy the assignment. Some were able to explore micro-oscillations of various joints and find new meaning for a common daily action. These dancers were able to stick with the exercise long enough to bypass initial distractions and discomforts, they began to notice subtle and positive shifts in internal information and logic:

'Standing became a place to stay alert, especially if I could use a mirror to "see" subtle shifts. Standing allows my thought to return to my body and breath without the risk of sleeping [...] I allowed my feet to feel and connect with the earth. This began to send wave-like feelings through my feet, all the way up to the top of my head. It was as if I was being gassed up like a car.'

And another:

'Today, standing, I felt the earth underneath me and imagined I could stand up as the earth rotated. This really gave me a sensation of "standing on my pelvis". I think the three resting postures this week helped me feel calmer and helped me stay in my body. I found this week, I could read without my body hurting [...] I'm trying in my time here to listen more and speak less,

but also to find my voice and speak out. I don't think these ideas are contradictory. Staying aware of my body – living in my body – helps.'

## **Creativity**

Responses gathered over the five years rarely offered a glimpse into how the benefits of sensory awareness issuing out of intentional rest could be captured, regained and channelled towards technique and performance. Pain and other psychophysical disturbances in many instances blocked further ventures into creativity. The characteristics of creativity have been well studied and include a combination of curiosity and naïveté with intellect, a combination of playfulness with discipline, openness to sensitivity with a low threshold of pain and discomfort, and a profound capacity for joy (Csíkszentmihályi 1990). Dancers who commit to studying somatics remark on its positive impact on the creative process (Galeota-Wozny 2001; Schwartz 2007). As dancers could begin to verbalize their experiences, their reflective experiences began to take a turn in the direction of creativity. As they were able to unmask physical habits bound up in the cultural and physiological ideologies of 'making a body' (Behnke 1997: 181), uncovering embedded muscular habits of trying, bracing and forcing, subtle and hidden micro-movements began to surface into larger avenues of expression:

'I enjoyed the experience of working this way – it is very different from the way I usually work, which is to "not stop until I GET IT". During rest, I didn't intend to think about my choreography, but in the middle of the rest, possibilities started to come and to be offered from my resting body. When I returned to work, a solution offered itself to me quite calmly and smoothly. I was surprised at how at ease I felt [...] I sense that "rest" is going to become an essential element of my dance and practice. I am a disciplined and muscular person – and I am proud of my ability to "force myself" to get through tough movements. This forcing of self, however, is often exhausting and unproductive. I sense that so much of my negative attitude toward dance and toward my career as a professional company dancer comes from my having felt forced to work despite exhaustion [...] Throughout my days here, I am trying to move in so many different ways and constantly having people telling me what to do, it was really nice to release from that and just move for my body, for myself, without thinking of choreography or "dance".'

## **Conclusion**

When somatic education and modern dance intersect, opportunities arise for reflecting on their shared values. While research points to the value of intentional rest within dance training, developing a method that captures the somatic concept of rest is essential. Despite the brevity of the seminar described here, it continues to bear fruit with each passing year. Closing discussions always reveal a deeper level of curiosity and understanding of somatics, as well as a nascent critique. Nonetheless, honing a reliable and valid method that adequately captures the construct of intentional rest still begs definition and elaboration within reflexive practice. Carrying the work forward requires a deeper investigation of rest and its subtexts. Structured journaling, interviews, inventories and other modes of data

collection need to be developed. The examples here reveal a range of experiences as dancers initially grapple with stopping movement and resting. A more lengthy process is needed to shift from initial states of awareness around rest towards greater accessibility and closer intimacy in reflexive practice (Hendricks 2009). However the method evolves, the somatic use of intentional rest is a process well worth investigating.

## Appendix

### Assignment 1

#### **Rest – Laying the groundwork ... or perhaps, laying yourself on the ground**

During the week, explore three different resting postures – one standing, one sitting and one lying down. Sustain the posture for 15 to 20 minutes, the time scientists describe as sufficient to evoke a physiological change. Ideally, choose a time when you are not thoroughly exhausted from dancing or needing to rush to another activity immediately afterwards. Finding this kind of time within your programme may take some doing – i.e. time that is not ‘squeezed’ in between this and that. Do your best to carve this time out for yourself. Think of this as something you might do as readily and routinely as eating. In each of the three sessions, note the following general guidelines. You can certainly add your own thoughts and ideas. These are only suggestions for defining the resting process.

1. Describe the resting postures. How is your body organized? For example, if you are lying down, are you tucked into a ball? Splayed out? Limbs flexed or extended? Posture symmetrical or asymmetrical? Is this posture something spontaneous or learned? Does anything about your choice surprise you?
2. Describe the place of rest. Where is it? What makes it ‘restful’? Do you utilize other types of supports (pillows, blankets, your favourite toy or drink)?
3. What happens when you start resting? How long does it take to quieten the body-mind? Do you struggle with distractions or persistent thoughts, rhythms, etc.?
4. What is your process of quietening yourself? Do you ‘do’ something physical/physiological, such as visualize ‘lengthening’ or ‘relaxing’ your muscles, follow your breathing? Can you come to a place of non-doing?
5. As you enter into the ‘zone’ of resting, do you find yourself falling asleep or becoming more awake?
6. Are you aware of any feelings and emotions associated with this activity?
7. Is the transition through the process smooth? Do you find yourself rushing to get it over with or so distracted that you cannot access other sensory information that might be useful to you?
8. When you are done, notice any changes in the general tone – muscular, emotional, cognitive, etc. What changed in you? How would you describe your experience?

**Culminating response:** Include any effect these three resting periods had on any aspect of your dancing, choreographing, rehearsing or other activity during the week.

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