

Somatic Education: The Quebec experience since 1992

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Since 1992 a group of somatic educators from various schools of practice has been involved in the creation in Québec of "Le Regroupement pour l'éducation somatique". The following methods are now represented:

- L'antigymnastique
- L'approche globale du corps et antigymnastique^{md}
- Gerda Alexander Eutony^{md}
- The *Feldenkrais*® Method
- The F.M. Alexander Technique
- La Gymnastique Holistique^{md}

The Massage Federation of Québec was willing to integrate us in a somatic education section. But after some hesitation we have refused to join that group, even if they offer to their members some third party insurance reimbursement and a lot of benefits due to the large number of members. We instead chose to create our own political body. We have also not considered associating ourselves with a broader group of somatic practices, because many of us feel that this heading covers a too wide variety of practices. We would have a hard time creating a consensus on some of the ideas, principles and methods, mostly on the educational versus the therapeutic stance, on the emotional and psychological prevalence conveyed by some approaches and on the fact that many of the somatic practices have already strong associations and/or strong traditions of their own .

Within "Le Regroupement" in Québec, 10 colleagues representing six (up to eight at one time) methods of somatic education have had monthly meetings since March 1992. We have given each other workshops and demonstration lessons of our respective approaches. We have created for ourselves a brochure describing Somatic Education as a field as well as a short description of each of our methods. We have found an insurance plan that can be extended to the practitioners of all of the represented methods. Most of all, we have learned of each other, finding out our differences, discovering our commonalities. Beyond discussions and workshops, we have also jointly participated in a few action-projects. For example, we have presented our domain and methods in the context of a large scientific symposium, where we were offering "movement-breaks" (as an alternative to "coffee-brakes"). We have also given public lectures on themes like sitting, walking, breathing, chewing, exercising,

etc. Each presentation was given jointly by colleagues trained in at least two methods. We have also prepared a presentation at a major international symposium on musculo-skeletal disorders in the working place. We have a yearly week end forum. In all these instances, other than presenting our singular methods, we intend to promote the broad domain of Somatic Education . With these on-going projects we learn to appreciate each other personally and professionally, building trust, respect and pleasure, for the basis of the development of **Somatic Education, Beyond Singular Methods** (this is by the way the title of an article that I wrote to reflect to “Le Regroupement” it’s early discussions over identity, differences and similarities.)

The whole project of a regrouping did start , like in some states of the United States, under the government pressure to supervise body-oriented practices in the alternative health domain. The government pressure is not really pressuring us anymore if it ever was. Yet, we have made representations to a government commission on alternative practices to clarify our educational stance in the somatic domain, and to establish ourselves in a complementary role in the health domain.

Beyond our differences and discussions, we are finding more and more our shared commonalities. The definition and distinction of the domain of Somatic Education is based, from our point of view on the following ideas:

SOMATIC EDUCATION IS A NEW DISCIPLINARY FIELD REGROUPING METHODS INTERESTED IN THE DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN BODY-MOVEMENT, AWARENESS, LEARNING AND THE ENVIRONMENT.

Our notion of soma is the one proposed by the late Thomas Hanna and the Magazine-Journal Somatics: **soma refers to the body as experienced from within.** The broader domain of somatic practices includes such modalities as bio-feedback, martial arts, yoga, bioenergetics and reichian methods, dance therapy, etc. Within that domain, Somatic Education focuses on those methods which seem to share a commitment towards the following points of focus.

Body-Movement: refers to the physical principles applying to the displacement and posture of the human body in the field of gravity. This may include, anatomy, physiology, kinesiology, biomechanics, ergonomics, from a third person perspective and most of all from an experiential phenomenological perspective.

Awareness: refers to the ability of living systems to self-regulate their behaviour, according to the feedback that they produce and monitor in their own action. This is done by paying attention to sensations, feelings and thoughts as experienced through movement, in action.

Learning: refers to the ability of such living systems to develop, improve

and mature in their ability to self-regulate. Somatic education methods bring concrete approaches to facilitate somatic learning. And they may use touch and/or verbalization to convey their teaching. The accent on learning is an important distinction when relating to other methods in the broader somatic domain where the therapeutic aspects may be more foreground, whether that is in "physical-therapies" or "psycho-therapies", where the interventions of the practitioners are oriented towards the difficulty, towards the understanding of the symptoms and their causes and towards the relieving and healing of traumas and wounds. Though Somatic Education methods may have healing benefits, it is neither our primary concern nor our field of competence as such. Also in this educational stance, we differentiate ourselves from most of the medical, psychological and pathological models. This seems important strategically and politically to all the representatives of the different methods involved in "Le Regroupement".

The environment: refers to the necessity of understanding and approaching the body in it's space i.e. the person in it's context, where there are other human beings, other species and in a continuity with the environment. Our interest is not limited to self-awareness by going deep inside to stay there. We also do not want to grow an awareness that is limited to the surface of the skin. Yes, epistemologically Somatic Education focuses on the embodiment of our lives but as a basis for perception and action in the world.

That is what I have to share for now. Obviously many of us are moving along these paths of definition, and socialization of our work. "Le Regroupement" is now preparing it's second symposium in April 1996 which will be open to practitioners and teachers of the methods represented in "Le Regroupement" as well as to academic researchers and independent somatic practitioners interested in joining in as associated members. We now have incorporated ourselves as a not-for-profit organization. Our Board of Directors is composed of delegates from the associations members of our group. We are actually organized as a federation of associations but we are also opened to individual membership. Who knows where our next steps will lead us? But I must say that the dynamism and the actions of "Le Regroupement" are inspiring and exciting. We believe it or not actually look forward to more meetings!

Note: Though most of our meeting notes and documents are in the French language, we have a few documents in English, including an early version of "Somatic Education: Beyond singular Methods" by Yvan Joly. Please phone or fax 450-671-0638 if you are interested. or write to Yvan Joly,
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