



**Drama and Authentic Movement as Intercultural
Communication Skill**

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ISSN 1470 – 9570

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The following article describes a workshop held at the international conference “Drama and Theatre in the Teaching and Learning of Language, Literature and Culture” at University College Cork, Ireland. Furthermore, it gives some background information about Authentic Movement and its leading practitioners, as well as outlining how it is practised. Finally, the article considers how the principles of Authentic Movement can be applied to intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

How do people from different cultures engage with each other? How do you cope with something or somebody unknown, strange, new and different?

One does not need to focus on two geographically and culturally widely disparate countries to encounter intercultural misunderstandings. Even when people from two neighbouring, e.g. European countries meet for the first time, they usually do so with certain preconceived ideas about each other. These ideas derive from a combination of shared historic experience, the traditions of previous generations, a differing awareness of the present, the perception of tourists from a particular neighbouring country, the presentation of that country in the media, and a variety of other things.

Facing another culture, the other, is a complex process, and long before language even begins to come into play, we perceive the body language, manner and appearance of the person we are dealing with. These perceptions may be influenced positively or negatively by our preconceived ideas and notions about a particular country. More often than not, we seek to find them confirmed in the other (person), and this fact in itself tends to counteract or, indeed, prevent any form of open-minded communication.

Our workshop "Drama as intercultural communication skill. How to face the other" was intended to offer strategies which may help to create an atmosphere favourable to intercultural encounters. On the one hand, this workshop was based on didactic theatrical

methods which have their origins in the work of such people as Stanislavski, Grotowski, Boal, Brook, and Mnouchkine.¹ On the other hand, the workshop drew some of its inspiration from the discipline of Authentic Movement, which originated in the field (and from the experience) of Modern Dance and is employed in the context of dance therapy as well as the performing arts.² It is also a discipline with potential for furthering the cause of intercultural encounters. It was above all the Authentic Movement principle of non-judgmental observation or *witnessing* that was used for this workshop.

The first part of the workshop focused on working at a pre-linguistic level, in an attempt to approach and tackle the following two questions:

- 1) How do I face the other in an unbiased way?
- 2) How do I deal with the other, with what is new and unfamiliar?

Using drama exercises and principles from Authentic Movement, the workshop was designed to develop a number of suggestions for an unprejudiced form of making contact.

2. Authentic Movement

The workshop centred on the methods of Authentic Movement which I describe below. In so doing I intend to outline the interrelationship between the practice of Authentic Movement and intercultural skills.

2.1 Background

The practice of Authentic Movement was initiated and named in the 1950s by the dancer Mary Starks Whitehouse and is continually in the process of being developed and articulated. Two other women have made a significant contribution to the formation of the art of Authentic Movement: Janet Adler and Joan Chodorow.

¹ Broadly speaking, all theatre directors referred to here have dealt with intercultural theatre forms. For further reading, see titles by Boal, Brook, Féral, Grotowski, Oida (Original title: “Hyoryu-Hyoru”, in which this Japanese actor describes the intercultural theatre experience derived from Brook’s (stage) work), Stanislavski.

Mary Starks Whitehouse (1911-1979) received her diploma from the Wigman Central Institute in Dresden (an institute of the so-called *Ausdruckstanz*) and she was also a student of Martha Graham. She studied at the C. G. Jung Institute in Switzerland and was a member of the American Dance Therapy Association, to mention only the main aspects of her rich background. Whitehouse conducted both a private movement therapy practice and a movement therapy teacher program in Los Angeles.³ She developed an approach to movement which is also called “authentic movement” or “movement in depth”.

Janet Adler, PhD, a Californian dance/movement therapist and former student of Mary Starks Whitehouse and psychologist John Weir, teaches the discipline of Authentic Movement internationally and was the founder and director of the Mary Starks Whitehouse Institute, the first school devoted to the study and practice of Authentic Movement. She is the author of several publications, including *The Offering from the Conscious Body. The Discipline of Authentic Movement*⁴ and director of the film *Still Looking* (1988) which reflects on her work in the discipline of Authentic Movement. She is a member of the Authentic Movement Institute in the San Francisco Bay Area which was founded in 1993.

Joan Chodorow, PhD, an analyst member of the C. G. Jung Institute of San Francisco, is a registered dance therapist and former president of the American Dance Therapy Association. Her early studies include dance studies, performance and teaching. She also studied with Mary Starks Whitehouse in the early 1960s. Since 1966 she has written numerous articles and publications on the philosophy and practice of dance therapy. In addition to her private practice, she continues to write, teach and supervise students and therapists. She has also taught an intensive summer course in Switzerland for many years.⁵

² For further reading see titles by Pallaro and Adler.

³ See Pallaro, Patrizia (ed.) (1999): *Authentic Movement. Essays by Mary Starks Whitehouse, Janet Adler and Joan Chodorow*, London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 17-28.

Chodorow, Joan (1996): “The Moving Imagination”. *A Moving Journal. Ongoing Expressions of Authentic Movement* 3, 2, 11-12.

Uretsky, Lynne (1996): “On Language and Authentic Movement”. *A Moving Journal. Ongoing Expressions of Authentic Movement* 3, 2, 7-9.

⁴ Adler, Janet (2002): *Offering from the Conscious Body. The Discipline of Authentic Movement*, Vermont: Inner Traditions.

⁵ See Pallaro 1999: 209-228.

Like Janet Adler, Joan Chodorow is a founding advisor of the Authentic Movement Institute.

Authentic Movement does not have a specific theoretical basis. It has evolved, and continues to evolve, out of the exploratory work of its practitioners and is influenced by Modern Dance, *Ausdruckstanz*, as well as psychotherapeutic theories and methods. Dietmar E. Pallasch describes in his PhD thesis within the field of dance therapy how he explored the similarities between Authentic Movement and related psychotherapeutic theories such as the theories of C.G. Jung, Arnold Mindell, Carl Rogers and Eugene Gendlin and, indeed, further research into this area is needed.⁶

2.2 The Form

“Authentic Movement explores the relationship between a mover and a witness, being seen and seeing.”⁷

The basic form of Authentic Movement is a dyadic form which includes a mover and a witness. There is no movement instruction in Authentic Movement, simply a mover and a witness. These roles usually interchange within a session, except in a therapeutic context. During a set timed session, the mover closes his or her eyes and allows inner physical or vocal impulses to guide his or her movement. The mover’s eyes are closed in order to attend more deeply to his or her kinaesthetic or inner experience. The movements may or may not be visible to the witness. The movements and/or sounds may be in response to an emotion, a dream, a thought, pain, joy, or whatever is being experienced at a given moment. The witness sits on the edge of the movement space - in the case of a group, in a circle and attends to both the mover and his or her own internal responses to the movement.

Chodorow 1996: 11-12.

⁶ Pallasch, Dietmar E. (2002): *Tief bewegt zum Ziel. Ein tanztherapeutischer Ansatz aus NLP und Authentic Movement*, Bielefeld: Junfermann Verlag, 6, 10-11.

⁷ Introduction on the homepage of the Authentic Movement Institute in San Francisco, <http://www.authenticmovement-usa.com>

The witness serves as a compassionate, non-judgmental mirror. Afterwards, the two speak about their experiences. The mover speaks first, followed by feedback from the witness.⁸

“The mover is the expert. The mover speaks before the witness. The witness doesn’t refer to any material before the mover has. We must own our judgments, projections and interpretations.”⁹

Within the framework of specific guidelines mover and witness can communicate with each other in a *safe* and compassionate context. The guidelines free the mover and the witness from judgement, projection and interpretation.

The guidelines for both mover and witness:¹⁰

- 1) I see observations based on the actual movement of the mover
- 2) I sense sensations of the body (kinaesthetic sensations in the body)
- 3) I feel emotion
- 4) I imagine image/story

In the following description of the guidelines, I will concentrate on the witnessing aspect, which seems to be the most difficult and demanding part.

- 1) The witness describes what he/she has seen based on the actual movement of the mover. It is important not to use interpretations (e. g. adjectives) but to concentrate on the actual description of physical movement, e. g. “I see you lifting your right arm”.
- 2) The witness notices sensations in his or her own body and may or may not share them with the mover, e. g. “I sense the contraction of my own biceps in my right arm”.
- 3) The witness may or may not share his or her feelings with the mover, e. g. “I feel tired and sad while seeing you lifting your arm”.

⁸ See Bauer, Susanne (2002): “Mindfulness in Motion”. In *Touch, A Quarterly Newsletter Exploring Touch, Healing and Consciousness*, Autumn 2002, 3.

⁹ Geissinger, Annie (1998): “Towards the Unknown. An Interview with Janet Adler”. *A Moving Journal. Ongoing Expressions of Authentic Movement. The Collective* 5, 3, 4-10.

¹⁰ The specific guidelines as they appear here were passed on as a teaching instruction during my training with Linda Hartley. But the guidelines are also embedded in Janet Adler’s book *Offering from the Conscious Body*. See the first chapter “Individual Body”, especially pp. 34 – 36.

4) The witness may or may not share a particular perception of the mover's movement, e. g. "I imagine a wounded animal lying on the ground lifting his foreleg".

These four principles are not always present in a feedback round. The most important part is to start off with the description of the movement and then follow it up with the other aspects of the witness's experience. The witness speaks in the first person singular to make sure that the feedback stays with him/her and to allow the mover the opportunity of agreeing or disagreeing with his/her response. The witness always speaks in the present tense and asks the mover whether he/she wants to hear any feedback. If the witness is not sure about what he/she has seen or has forgotten parts of the sequence, it may be enough to say: "I see you" or "I hear you".

Authentic Movement is practised in many varied contexts such as psychotherapy, personal/creative investigation and as a source of original artistic creation in dance, theatre, writing and the visual arts.

3. Authentic Movement as an intercultural communication skill – an approach

The principles of Authentic Movement and, above all, the *witnessing aspect* appear to be particularly helpful in an intercultural context. In combination with exercises drawn from drama-in-education, a foundation may be laid for initiating non-verbal contact, which may then be expanded to include some form of verbal exchange. The emphasis here is precisely on the initial non-verbal impressions, the messages of body language that may prove decisive in opening channels of communication. Embedding Authentic Movement in an intercultural context is a new approach to intercultural encounters which has yet to be explored on a more theoretical basis.

To begin with, it seems essential to offer simple exercises in order to enable all participants to make contact with one another. During our workshop in Ireland, the participants were encouraged to do simple walking exercises with their eyes open or closed, with or without a partner. They began their search for a partner with their eyes open, i.e. quite consciously. One of the exercises encouraged the participants to meet and greet each other. Here they had to focus on *how* they wanted to greet the other person: did they want to shake hands,

did they want to embrace the other person, to rub their noses or simply stay in eye contact and say “hello”? The purpose was to find out what kind of distance or proximity each one of the participants wanted to have to the others they encountered. Since the cultural *greeting vocabulary* is different in every country, it is important to find out where the individual feels comfortable while greeting the other. In the framework of a workshop we can experiment with proximity and distance while learning to have a non-judgmental attitude towards our partner. During the next stage, the participants relied on other senses, mainly their sense of touch, in trying to find a partner blindly with their hands. As we discussed this later on, it was interesting to see whether the same partner had been chosen or whether one’s blind choice had been anticipated, and what conclusions were to be drawn from that fact.

The principal of non-judgmental observation was made use of in a very simple drama exercise: one of the participants crosses the stage at his/her own speed with open eyes, moving towards the circle of witnesses. The person who volunteered may then comment on what he/she experienced crossing the stage and facing the *witnessing audience*. Next the witnesses render their observations, trying to make sure that any kind of evaluation – either positive or negative – is carefully avoided. The first step is an exact description of the purely physical act of walking. This may be repeated several times with different volunteers in order to practise the act of watching. In our workshop, there was one occasion when two participants crossed the stage engaging in a non-verbal dialogue both with each other and the witnesses.

This exercise was followed up by an exchange of views in the workshop group. Not surprisingly, impressions and emotions which derived from witnessing the movements on the stage varied among the participants. And here further issues of interest emerge that could be explored more systematically: where do the boundaries between intercultural and simply interpersonally rooted perception lie? Is it possible to identify and isolate particular aspects that influence the way human beings perceive one another’s gestures, expressions and movements? And – are there factors which can be attributed solely to the diversity of cultural backgrounds at all?

Just formulating these questions is bound to raise even more questions, illustrating the complexity of this field of interest and the necessity for further scientific exploration. Finding and sketching the corner stones of this field is in itself a challenging task. Two central questions may be worth noting here: is it always the intercultural aspect that plays a key role in intercultural misunderstanding and how can we identify it? Authentic Movement could be another tool in developing an approach to answer these questions.

Sixteen people from different European countries attended the workshop: language teachers, university lecturers, lecturers in drama-in-education and other people dealing with pedagogical and intercultural issues mentioned above. Due to time constraints I introduced and practised only the first guideline mentioned above. The other three were mentioned but not practised. However, the exercises done provided a means of experiencing the field of non-verbal intercultural and interpersonal understanding.

4. Conclusion

When trying to achieve intercultural communication the realisation that a particular gesture or posture may have a particular meaning for oneself and an entirely different one for another person is an essential basis to start out from. As we move on to speech and behaviour the individual differences increase, making it even more important to be very sensitive and clear from the beginning. The aspect of “(cultural) awareness” was an issue which we discussed in the final round of our workshop, concentrating on the guidelines of Authentic Movement. What all participants came to realise was how difficult it was for them to exclusively observe a mover. Being a witness and a non-judgmental mirror was a much more difficult task than the participants had expected.

The guidelines of Authentic Movement offer a way of meeting *the other* in a *safe* framework. In everyday life, projections, interpretations and judgments fill our thoughts and may easily be an obstacle to any open-minded communication. Especially in an international context you may meet a ‘confusion of body-languages’ which often leads to misunderstandings. We tend to interpret the other’s body language and behaviour from the perspective of our own social and cultural background and this may be a major reason for mutual misunderstandings. In using and practising the principles of Authentic Movement,

each one of us may experience the role of *the mover* and *the witness*. The practice of merely watching the other's actual movements – without taking a judgmental attitude but with an awareness that pictures and interpretations are rooted in ourselves and our personal, social and/or cultural background - might have a liberating effect on our meeting the other on a basis of mutual understanding.

Authentic Movement may be exploited yet further in the area of intercultural communication. Following specific instructions, it may be practised either in its original form¹¹ or used in combination with drama-in-education techniques. No doubt further research, testing and in-depth study will be necessary. However, our workshop in Ireland was clearly indicative of the applicability and the usefulness of the method in this field.

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¹¹ See section 2.2: Authentic Movement – The Form

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Biodata

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