Embodied Inquiry in Holistic Education

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The fabric of human beings is deeply connected. We are designed as body and soul, heart and mind, veins and tissues, bellies and hips, hearts and limbs. The core value of holistic education is the ingredient of connection, and increasingly there is a longing to emphasize the relationship with our bodies to the art of living, teaching, and writing. My passion in my vocation and life has been to honor all the textures of the body; for the body is messy and wonderful, paradoxical and present, full of limitations and wonder. One cannot control when he or she weeps for grief or ecstasy, or dictate body language, which is as natural as breathing. Breath connects us all—too many absent breaths we suffer. And yet many of us are breathing from the neck up, even while reading this text. So, I invite you to take a deep breath, release your arms, sternum, and shoulders and release a huge sigh.

This chapter introduces the body as a place for embodied inquiry. I have recently written a more comprehensive book on embodied inquiry, but here is a taster for you to let your bodies wake up to their longing (Snowber, 2016). Embodied ways of inquiry are a place of deep listening to the pulses within our lives, the rumbling inside our cells and the sacred and mundane space where body knowledge and body wisdom can be honored. Here there is room to listen to each curve of the heart, nuance of the fingers, and lilt in your steps. I am after a visceral knowing and becoming, and am committed to writing that attends to the sensuous and embodied articulation of thought. Here there is rhythm and poetry, vulnerability and joy, and a return of writing from blood turning to ink. I invite you as a reader to take a journey with me in reclaiming your own body’s wisdom and befriend what sometimes has been left behind. There is a lot of talk of no child left behind, yet what has often been left behind is the body.

There is ample research and data on areas of the body, whether it is from neuroscience, somatics, dance studies, phenomenology, feminist thought, or socio-cultural perspectives and a variety of philosophers, artists, and educators. The body has been informed and inscribed by many of these discourses, and the conversations in various fields continue to legitimize the body in its relationship to knowledge. This is in stark contrast to the many years of polarity rooted in Cartesian dualism that posited two distinct and mutually exclusive domains of the body and mind. The past few decades have exhibited a proliferation of scholarship that has made a mark in theorizing the connection of body to knowledge and understanding and shifted the way one conceptualizes the body (Bresler, 2004, Cancienne & Snowber, 2003; Fraleigh, 2004; Hanna, 1988, 2014; Lawrence, 2012; Lloyd, 2011, 2012; Sheets-Johnstone, 2009; Shusterman, 2008; Smith, 2012; Smith & Lloyd, 2006; Snowber, 2002, 2005, 2012; Springgay & Freedman, 2007; Stinson, 1995, 2004). And there has been amazing scholarship in the fields of somatics and spirituality, which has attended to the
connections between physicality and spirituality (Halprin, 2000; Johnson, 1983, 1994; Lamothe, 2015; Snowber, 2004, 2014, 2016; Williamson, 2010; Williamson, Batson, Whatley, & Weber, 2014). However, this scholar and dancer still longed for an articulation of the body, which was compatible with the sensuous, visceral, and poetic way the body lives in the world. There has been a lack of attention to this area, so it has been my passion to develop a scholarly and artistic way to not only experience the phenomenological body, but also write from the body.

In this chapter, I draw upon arts-based ways of research, which have sprung from the field of curriculum theorists as I have developed a way of speaking and writing about the body, which is from the body (Aoki, 1993; Bickel, 2005; Cancienne, 2008; Leavy, 2015; Ricketts & Snowber, 2013; Snowber, 2005, 2007, 2012, 2013, 2016). Arts-based research grew out of curriculum studies and has burgeoned and informed many fields, including holistic education, where multiple forms of qualitative research have exploded. Areas of poetic inquiry, performative inquiry, artography, narrative inquiry, and embodied forms of inquiry are methodological streams that allow for holistic methods of investigating, discovering and uncovering research.

The various forms of arts-based research have the capacity to intersect with our own lived experiences, our relationship to the world and with ourselves. Here, the interconnections between the personal and professional, autobiographical and artistic are made apparent within research; taking on the endeavor of researching our own lives. The fields of arts-based research, curriculum theory, phenomenology, and holistic education gave me the wings to let my belly and hips be places of knowledge, discovery, and wisdom. In the field of Curriculum Theory, I was given the soil to conceptualize curriculum as lived, and the body as a place of inquiry. I wrote, taught, and performed these connections. My dance practice leaped from my own lived experience and took form in movement, the poetic, essay, voice and performance. I did not have to leave my artist at the door of the academy, but could let it inform all my work. The field of holistic education companioned many of these alternative areas of scholarship and provided the theoretical framework to honor epistemologies that connected body, mind, and spirit (Denton, 2005; Denton & Ashton, 2004; Margolin, 2013, 2014; Miller & Nigh, 2017; Miller, Karsten, Denton, Orr, & Kates, 2005; Richmond & Snowber, 2009/2011; Snowber, 2005, 2014; Snowber & Bickel, 2015). Both arts-based methodologies and holistic education have fostered a connection for the scholar, artist, and educator to connect mind, body, and heart and have informed one another. Integral to attending to the creative is a holistic emphasis of including all of who we are as humans in the inquiry process. Combining the areas of holistic education and arts-based methodologies was particularly salient for me in developing and articulating an embodied way of inquiry.

Inviting the Body into Presence

I often tell my students that we do not have bodies, but we are bodies. We came from the belly and hips and we must return there (Snowber, 2012). In Western culture, there is more concern about having a flat stomach, what our hair looks like, or the size of our nose, hips, and chest than how the body feels as it moves in space, or connects to the expanse in our limbs. Prominence has been placed on the outer body, rather than the lived body, which has the capacity to connect to emotional intelligence. The lived body is how one notices posture, sitting at the computer, or the breeze on a face, an ache in the small of the back, or the feeling of expanse in the torso when swimming in the lake. It is where tears and ecstasy lie and the sensations in the heart take root. Children can have less inhibition and skipping, tussling, and jumping are more natural forms of expression until they learn otherwise and there is the erroneous message that attending is equated with stillness. Some of us need to move to be still, or to enter a flow where listening calls us to attention. Therefore, in moving, one can have the capacity to be more present and awake. So, over time, many of us leave our bodies, even if we actually believe in connection or a holistic understanding. The wealth and depth available becomes distant, and unless there is a dedicated somatic practice of integrating body and mind, it is easy to
leave the integrated body behind. One example of leaving the body behind is to see knowledge as distant, untouchable, and not allow for knowledge to be a place of intimacy. Here, knowledge and learning only focuses on the conceptual, and long lasting possibilities of transformation are more limited. If we just stop to remember what teachers or curricula had the most impact on our learning journey, it is often connected to an experiential component, which called forth all our senses.

I like to think of the body as a free global positioning satellite (GPS) system (Snowber, 2010). It tells us where we are located in space and time and where we need to go. The body waits as a patient lover to be reclaimed, honored, embraced, to be listened to and expressed through. We do not listen only through the mind, but through the body: imagination, neck, toes, pelvis, and shoulders. One of the greatest gifts as humans is to be able to listen to the bold proclamations and subtle sensations that the body is always revealing. Think of the time that you passed the ocean, or an apple tree, or heard the sounds of the river, calling you back to a place in childhood. Memories live and dwell through the senses and in fragrance there lies a storage house of lived experience.

**Grammar of the Gut**

A holistic approach to learning calls the body back to a place of being comfortable in our own skins. Here, one can let the difficulties and beauty live together in what I call a paradoxology, in praise of paradox (Snowber, 2002, p. 31). The body is like a lover, wanting to woo you back to a deeper embodied connection, where listening to the body is a breath away; a breath away from returning home to hearing what the body is speaking. I call this the grammar of the gut, where syllables are pronounced in the language of sweat and tears, gestures and postures, contractions and releases. Listening to the body is a valuable gift; in fact, it is not separate from spiritual, intellectual, or philosophical guidance. Embracing body knowledge honors a holistic and healthy path. But what does that truly mean for individuals and how does this connect to our personal, professional, scholarly, creative, and educative lives? And how can we call the body back as a holistic practice?

“The body has a pronouncement all to itself, which is felt in the lived experience of fingers and toes, shoulders and hips, through the heart of veins and on the breath of limbs” (Snowber, 2014, p. 119). Notice how often we can have a visceral feeling in our bellies when some event in the world can be imbued with horror or loss, or when our chest flutters when excited, or our shoulders relax and breath softens when relieved at hearing good news. There are times someone may say they are doing so wonderfully, but something inside our kinetic intelligence tells us otherwise. What if we actually brought all of our bodies to honoring a way of listening? Listening through our limbs and words. Here is the muscle of intuition giving voice.

Embodied ways of inquiry are an invitation to dwell more richly in the territory of the sensual life, where all of life is sensual, sacred, and whole. Our physicality and sensuality is a birthright connected to what it means to be human. Feeling the salt on our face, the freshness of water on flesh, the blood of life running through our cells, the sway of a bending willow, the taste of a wild strawberry, or the joy of skipping are all forms of embodied knowing. To cherish our bodies is a sacred and holistic art. We get information through our bodies in countless ways, and this is not just for pleasure but also for how to live more fully, compassionately, and truly in a wide-awake state, as philosopher Maxine Greene (1995) reminds us. There is much emphasis on mindfulness these days, but I’d like to stretch that concept to bodyfulness, or a mindfulness that emphasizes the body. The word choice utilized for articulation around mindfulness can inform the philosophical positioning of the emphasis of mind over body, or suggest the mind has the body in control, rather than a place of harmony. I continue to be conscious of the way our words inform the view of our bodies, as if the mind sees the body as the poor sister. Mind, body, and soul are deeply connected, interwoven and braided within our beings. It is time for us to let the braids out.

One strand of inquiry that continues to animate my own research, artistic practice of dance and poetry as well as teaching, is the question, “what would it look like to bring the body into places of
How can we embrace the complexity and paradox of being full-bodied humans? The body is messy and unpredictable, and doesn’t give a plan when sick or has a spontaneous reaction of elation. The body cannot always be prescribed, controlled, or fit into the neatness of a curriculum. The body is the lived curriculum. I have been fortunate that over the past three decades I have had ample opportunity and freedom to teach in a university where I can explore what I call “body pedagogy” (Snowber, 2005). There is much emphasis on being a reflective practitioner in both teacher education and graduate class in education and many have been schooled in gifted writer Parker Palmer’s words when he says “we teach who we are” (1998, p. 2). The question begs to be asked, where is our body in the process of teaching who we are? As soon as an educator enters a class, the students know if he or she is comfortable in his or her body. We teach with and through our full bodies. I work with student teachers and open up places to learn improvisation, movement, and body awareness as places to befriend their bodies and reflect with their bodies, minds, and hearts. This is not an area that one needs a cognitive shift in understanding the body, but it is necessary to feel the body from the inside out.

I open up spaces for my pre-service teachers to learn simple ways of moving their bodies that incorporate creative movement, contemporary dance, and a variety of somatic practices. Even simply breathing through our whole bodies, and stretching the muscles, loosening the joints, activating the voice, and moving out of the comfort zone of desks, chairs, and devices can be a radical act. At first it can be a leap, to dance in a community, tell stories with words and movement, create new gestures, but it doesn’t take long for students to discover that there is a visceral creativity waiting within their bones to be unleashed. From these places of bodily awakening, we write poems, haikus, narratives, and begin to ignite our bodies as a place of deep listening. Our teacher education students write a credo—a belief in their philosophy of teaching. I invite them to dance and move some of their words, to get the words inside their skin. We can take our own students as far as we can go in terms of creativity. Creativity is a birthright and bringing the body to the creative process has the capacity to birth new ideas, perceptions, and possibilities only a breath away.

My goal is to always have my students know that the most important thing they can do for their own students is show up for their own lives, completely. Here they can find ways to think on their feet, perceive with the eyes in the back of their heads, and listen to the knowing under the skin. The world is far too complex and difficult for every curriculum to address the rate of change. But if we connect to all of who we are—body, mind, soul, imagination, cognition, muscles—there is the opening to trust the brilliance within us. I have had teachers find ways to bring the body to teaching in ways that they may have never thought before, whether it is letting students find body shapes in geometry, or bringing their gestural emotions to a Shakespeare play, or understanding the lifecycle of bees through creative movement. But most of all, when the body is brought to pedagogy, more room is made for a full-bodied holistic approach to teaching in difficult times.

The gift of holistic ways of learning and teaching give rise to connecting to all the fabrics of our lives. Body pedagogy supports the reality that we teach through our bodies, and learning takes place through all the intelligences. Therefore, experiential, somatic, visceral, and embodied practices within teaching are imperative for including a holistic classroom. Movement has the possibility to reach us physically and emotionally at our core, and it is an invitation to reimagine ourselves and the worlds we are in (Snowber, 2012). It is important for me to take the classroom outside the confines of scholarship and education?” Given the scope of this chapter, I would like to focus on three areas of how I see the body informing and being compatible with the field of holistic education. All three areas connect to what I call embodied ways of inquiry, for inquiry connects to all of our teaching, writing, living, being, and researching. These areas are, body pedagogy, body inquiry, and research practice and they are braided together as a three-strand chord. One cannot be fully separated from the other just as body, soul, mind, and heart are in a constant dance with each other.
walls, allowing for experiential, visceral, and somatic ways of learning, particularly in the class I teach on Embodiment. This class is now offered in graduate cohorts in Arts Education, Health Education, and Contemplative Inquiry. Even though the context may differ, what is central is the connections to the world of our bodies, and the world outside. We walk around lakes and write from being in the natural world in silence, do inquiry in botanical gardens and feel and weave ourselves through the textures, colors, and scents; seeing through artistic, bodily, and scientific lenses. Hundreds of shades of green enter the visceral imagination. We go to galleries and performances, or leave the classroom and share our writings around within different architectural spaces in the building. Often, students in a university setting are attached to a device, and yet the most sensational and sensate device is within. The inner spirit is longing for attention, waiting patiently as a lover to bring the body to all one does, whether it is science or artmaking, the full body wants more real estate in our lives.

To attend with all of our bodies, hearts, minds, and spirits is a radical act and has a direct effect on living and teaching. Annie Dillard, an extraordinary writer says, “You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment” (1990, p. 68). Living through our bodies is a way to give voice to our own astonishment and opening up the steps to being fully alive.

Body Inquiry: Listening and Responding Through the Body

What would it mean for our bodies to be truly a place of listening and responding to ourselves and the world around us? What would our bodies say about climate change, or a shift in heart, or how someone performs power? As a dancer, writer, and scholar, I have always felt it is the questions that are more important than the answers. What does it mean to ask questions through my body? I will never forget the day I was doing an improvisation of dance and voice, and I said, “Whom did they kill first? – It was the artists, poets, and intellectuals.” I hadn’t significantly thought of the ramifications of my mother surviving genocide in years. That one line put me on a trajectory to rediscover my own Armenian heritage and not only go to Armenia, but to recover my identity through integrating dance and poetry as an inquiry to my own lineage. The strong movements of longing and lament rippled through my body as if the history was inside me, embedded in an ancient form, yet in my middle-aged body. Sometimes the questions, the chase of curiosity within us, needs to be opened up, as a flower, watered and fed by the literal loosening of moving the body. I often think of an archaeological dig; here stored within us, is the material to research lives for years to come. Many years ago, in our joint article, “Writing Rhythm: Movement as Method” (2003), Mary Beth Cancienne and I articulated how we are moving researchers and use movement method within the education research process to open up the questions and see the self as a place of discovery. The body has a huge capacity to open up places of knowledge and wisdom where the feet, hands, hips, and heart literally uncover multiple realities and perceptions weaving inquiry, research, and pedagogy together.

Research Practice: Writing from the Body

Much of the training around writing, particularly within academic circles, has been thought of as coming from the head, as if our body was detached from this process. Thinking of writing as having our fingers on the keyboard is everyday practice. Yet, at one time, there was more emphasis on words coming from oral culture. I am interested in getting our feet in our thinking and thinking on our feet. To let the breath in our hands and hips, throat and back to seep onto the page. How can one nourish a writing practice that connects to the body, where words become a place to sing and dance on the page? Words and sentences, syllables and grammar have a rhythm and tone and yearn to be an extension of the interior life, where the personal is political, the poetic has precision, and writing is a holistic act connecting to body, mind, and soul. Cognition and intuition become partners in this dance.

My own practice of writing, as well as what I introduce to my students, includes cultivating an ongoing relationship between physicality and writing. Attending to a flow in your body, whether
a practice of yoga, walking, swimming, or dancing and then writing, allows for syllables to connect back to the belly. Even the simple act of letting your breath in your words can create space and rhythm in the stream of a writing practice. When I teach a class, we move, walk, dance, or breathe in connection to writing prompts. Students are encouraged to go on foot with the body, as philosopher Helene Cixous says, “Writing is not arriving; most of the time it’s not arriving. One must go on foot with the body” (1993, p. 65). The connections between physicality and literacy allow for the sentient world to inhabit the writing process and bring body and mind together. Writing from the body opens up spaces for the vulnerabilities of our lives to be a place of honoring, listening, and expression. So, one might ask, what does this have to do with research? It is important to understand that research is also an endeavor in researching and listening to our own lives and the lives of others. Often, when writing, there is the tendency to go back to the head, and not have the capacity to caress the details in ways that bring the same kind of aliveness in which one experienced them. My task as an educator and researcher is to open up places for my students to write through all their senses. To see writing and research also as a place of art, so theses and dissertations can be places of writing that soar with poetry, narrative, prose, and scholarship which has the kind of writing that the writer and reader fall in love with. To fall into the beauty of words, where a word can hold a sky.

Everything is material for the holistic curriculum, whether it is transitions in life, grief, or joy, or living in uncertainty. There is a connection between the personal and universal as our narratives and stories are found within each other. Autobiographical approaches to research and inquiry continue to be present in a variety of qualitative methodologies and arts-based ways of research within qualitative inquiry has opened up connections between integrating narrative, poetic, performative, and embodied ways of articulating language, ideas, and split open the ways in which research can be construed. Holistic education has had an emphasis on the connections between heart, body, mind, and soul. The blending of these fields is deeply needed in a world thirsty for integration and reimagining scholarship.

Invitation

Much more resides in our bodies than we know. Passion is often an endangered species, yet lives in the cracks of our skin, in between the tissues. Integration is the place to honor even the inconsistencies and uncertainty in our lives, and often through our bodies. As I write this, I am reminded that breath connects us to our bodies, and that is very precious. The sky this week has been filled with smoke from fires in the interior of British Columbia, Canada. The earth is in lament, and there is no one who cannot witness this reality, when the air is threatened. I invite you to honor all the parts of your body as a place for the spiritual and intellectual to take root and become a place of inquiry. Be compassionate and let the body have its voice. Here, too, is a place to begin again.

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