

## Ruth Quinn

# Teaching Space

*I also encourage students to notice the distinctions between internal mind chatter and an attentive internal body listening, noticing their own and others kinesics. I want my classes to provide the environment in which the actor can study the dynamic between internal and external focus and attention and experiment with different approaches to varying this mode.*

I have been teaching theatre, drama and performance for fourteen years. In the last three I have been delivering movement and text work at the University of Central Lancashire on a BA (Hons) Acting degree. The degree has a strong emphasis on psychophysical approaches. I have taught in a variety of institutions in Britain and have been privileged to work with a variety of women practitioners throughout these years. My own training and learning throughout this time has continued, and I have, of course, been inspired and influenced by the work of others.

Most classes I teach are three hours long. Some have a stronger emphasis upon technique as opposed to a specific module focus. My approach to movement, voice and text is always integrated and has a strong psychophysical emphasis. I teach in a large dance studio with good light but poor heating and ventilation. I always plan my work for the whole semester and try to keep an eye on the theoretical and practical elements that need to be delivered. I plan the specifics of each class on a weekly basis. Within the actual class there is a strong holding of intention and improvisation, within the approach. I try to hold the intention of the class tightly and then lightly. I then try to improvise and be attentive and flexible to the needs and possible outcomes arising within the class-work.

*We try to attune our own thinking to harmonise with students' particular interests, because we realise that in their interests lie the key to their needs and capacities. Education cannot supply individual capacities - these must be inborn - but it can stimulate and aid in their growth; it can assist students by giving them the opportunity to develop themselves.*

H. Doubler, *Education through Dance in The Body Can Speak*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2002

There is a quality of holding an ethical space that all educators bring. I always try to ensure that I have created that

safe space, in which experimentation and questioning is allowed and bullying and prejudice is always challenged. This holding of space is done with the body. There is an attentiveness in my eyes that hopefully reflects an interest in the work being made and the skills of the student. There is also a placing of the work in a context, which happens again with the use of the eyes and body in the class space, but also through the questioning once the work is shown.

The ethical holding is shorthand for a variety of educational principles and methodologies that underpin my work. These are often taught and reflected both implicitly and explicitly in both the exercises and interactions in the class. The first is a quality of awake ness. A quality of presence that understands that the present moment is the place of change and possibility. This idea is developed through eye work; eye exercises and stretches, and then enhancing and developing the eyes' ability to shift focus effectively and quickly. The eye exercises also enhance and improve spatial awareness. Though this is an acting class, I often refer students to many of the excellent spiritual writers who elaborate on how to stay present and awake. Writers such as Thich Nhat Hanh and movement practitioners such as Elsa Gindler and Moshe Feldenkrais, all discuss our understanding of self-image in relation to our movement work. Our warm up exercises become awakening exercises that bring new presence and attention to the day. It demands a kinaesthetic listening and brings a new heightened awareness to our bodies. Somatic practices such as those developed by Elsa Gindler are often more about consciousness than about systems.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding and engaging with the discourse of how to be an artist in our post-modern world is I think an essential for

all young people training in the Arts. I try to encourage students at first not to be too comparative in their approach to their work, but rather to pit themselves against themselves. To set their own standards, see a lot of work by other artists, talk and debate as much as possible and always question the intentions in the work. Of course however, all students and artists do compare and do judge. But we also have to stay profoundly with a place of generosity in our work because the skill of acting always requires great ensemble work, which demands generosity. The extent to which you can effectively teach generosity is also debatable. We can each only ever work on being ourselves to our fullest extent. This naturally leads students on to finding new and exciting ways of viewing their personality and the Self, through self-analysis and observation of human behaviour.

The importance of observation and discussing ways of seeing helps students to understand the ways in which work is framed. Hopefully this enables them to understand the contexts that surround any given idea/theme or text, and bring thoughtful research and reflection. I try to support the students to do this by bringing the world, issues and dilemmas into the class in morning mental notes and in summative discussions. This can mean using visual images (newspapers, books, adverts, films, and paintings) and also drawing and creating many visual and imaginary connections with environments, when working to develop their imaginations in play. This can also mean encouraging the students to define the space between each other in the class, inhabiting a collaborative landscape in imaginative play, through to encouraging them to imagine and see connections with people

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1. D. Hanlon Johnson, *Bone Breath and Gesture*.

and places on the other side of the world. This is where all acting becomes related to all ecology and ways of living.

All this work is informed through somatic practices that encourage us to explore the body and its potentials through improvisation and play. The work of F.M. Alexander, Elsa Gindler, Moshe Feldenkrais and Rudolf Laban are all essential components in these acting explorations. In addition to the wider principles there is an approach to the body and the imagination that I try to embed in young actors, as I believe if understood well and engaged with, it will be a great resource throughout their careers. This is a way to analyse and understand the way our complex beings work. It also encourages a strong understanding of how each student works with their creative process in their bodies. It is about consciousness and awareness, and understanding our kinaesthetic processes. A spiritual and spatial understanding of inner/outer, above/below, connection/disconnection, conscious/unconscious magnetism/radiation, light/darkness holds the work and encourages students to discover continuum and rest. These polarities and the tools that can help us explore them, also enable a student to assess and understand the dynamics with exercises and performance work.

The work is further informed by many great movement practitioners and practices specifically: Authentic Movement and the work of Mary Stark Whitehouse and Janet Adler; Body Mind Centring and the work of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen; somatic techniques and practices that demand further anatomical knowledge and joy in understanding and celebrating our visceral quality. At the moment we study anatomy collaboratively in class through diagrams and visuals, and through homework set. But I am questioning whether we should have a formal anatomy class. This work develops as

the relationships with students develop, as it demands greater trust and understanding of therapeutic awareness and skills. It also begins to develop highly the work of seeing and witnessing and knowing how to track movement.

My practice with students often starts with floor-work. The importance of a relaxed nervous system seems crucial to integrating good movement work. Even five minutes on the floor seems to me important and on other occasions this relaxation time can involve a variety of imaginative exercises and can be longer. It is about pausing, trying to stop a little more. The shift of our weight onto the floor also allows a mental shift to take place. The language of embodied practice prioritises the importance of keeping a connection between the internal and external landscapes, and internal/external attention and listening. Floor-work and relaxation is a good way to practice this connection. Throughout the class, I encourage students to be attentive to the shifts in this dynamic. I also encourage students to notice the distinctions between internal mind chatter and an attentive internal body listening, noticing their own and others kinesics. I want my classes to provide the environment in which the actor can study the dynamic between internal and external focus and attention and experiment with different approaches to varying this mode.

Full body relaxation and use of the imagination is followed by pelvic work. This involves leg swings and exercises to stabilise the pelvis and encourage students to explore and understand the weight and function of the pelvis.

Sometimes we explore the inner body by taking an imaginative journey inside first and then exploring movement and exercise from that place. Arm releases and simple movement stretches that work with spatial awareness and shape, enable the student to explore and develop different movement

possibilities. Through release based work and gentle floor-work the students begin to find ways up to a vertical position.

Here we may often work on developing a neutral body and then continuing to warm up the body, through working up through the feet and legs, to pelvis, to upper body, to head neck and back, to face. Often voice work is best combined in these warm ups and students can warm up their voices gently as they warm up their bodies. The work with breath and the ways in which breath informs and develops mood and character is important, as the understanding of how text can be enjoyed in the flesh and how we make words alive and dynamic. Observation of breath and the pause between inhalations and exhalations is very important in working in performance. Often the class may culminate with a class-based performance in which some work or a small exercise is observed, and evaluated.

Within a safe, ethical teaching space and using the tools of internal/external listening, I encourage students to work through practical exercises that focus upon balance, spatial patterning and spatial awareness. Our bodies are forever in space. The environment/space we are in determines so strongly how our bodies react. The qualities of space around us can significantly impact upon the quality of movement. Here the power of the imagination really comes into play. With most exercises, I offer the students images that can enable them to work with the imaginative construct of the movement capacity. These images function very effectively and allow a quality of embodiment to happen for students. We literally begin to fill ourselves with images and thereby re-experience, remember the world, and

come to know it more.

An integrated approach to theatre and performance work understands our bodies as 'whole', the gestalt that brings synthesis to both our impressions and expressions. We work with the mind/body in a psychophysical relationship. The spirit part of us is never fully discussed and yet many of us would uphold the fact that we also have a spirit. The language I use in the class refers to and acknowledges spirit, often through the use of breath and its inspirational qualities, but also through an awareness of the un-see-able yet knowable qualities of life.

RUTH QUINN (Britain) is a theatre lecturer and director, and poet. She has been teaching Acting and Theatre Studies in Higher Education for seven years. She has a passion of text, poetry and playwriting and recently directed April de Angelis' *The Positive Hour*.