

## Health Promotion and The Life/Art Process

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### Introduction

I teach college students health promotion. My classes are filled with predominantly multicultural, multilingual, and digitally savvy students. These students tell me that an average college class can be tedious and repetitive. They say they're bored and lose attention during long lectures. Many are starting to take classes online because they feel that if they are going to have a disembodied learning experience, it may as well be through the computer. My courses aim to go beyond teaching health to building bridges between practical embodied healthy experiences in the classroom, life-long learning, and empowerment. Using short written assignments and movement-based expressive arts, I engage students creatively in self-reflection and social analysis. I don't do this alone; inclusion is modeled throughout the semester with students as peer-educators. Together we develop a dynamic classroom with interactive hands-on experiences, respectful open conversations, and opportunities for leadership in a caring environment.

Almost a decade ago (2008-2009), I took a year-long sabbatical to study new models for health education. When I returned to campus, my Department asked me to present my scholarship at a faculty-student mixer. With heart racing, breath quickening, my body alerted me to the challenge. I could not simply present my research; I would have to embody it. Artfully poised –feet, legs and hips firmly grounded– connecting with everyone in the room through purposeful eye contact, I slowed my breathing, knees slightly bent, in a relaxed confident “stance,” and read from the baseline statement developed during Tamalpa professional training:

*I am a courageous, compassionate woman concerned about the general disconnection within and between ourselves, the natural world, and each other. I value relationships, creative expression, health, and social justice. Culture matters to me. I belong to a global community of dignity and human rights. My purpose is facilitating peace through innovative teaching methods that bring the whole body into the classroom. My calling is to teach health through movement and unleash the transformative power of the arts.*

With silence as a resource, I waited for the audience's response before speaking and making explicit connections between art, health, education, and my life. I wanted to show innovative teaching methods in public health with a sense-based language that enlivens the classroom. The voice and gestures accompanying my presentation demonstrated, not just lectured about, an embodied pedagogy that I bring to my graduate and undergraduate courses, not merely an intellectual presentation of research findings.

### Where is the body in the curriculum?

The idea to study at Tamalpa came from many sources, one of which was the experience of having taught Women's Health with a 15-minute “stretch-segment” as part of the academic curriculum. It was an experiment in embodied pedagogy and a visceral response to the physical activity guidelines that recommend adolescents do one hour or

more of daily movement and adults at least 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) a week (U.S. Dept. of Health Guidelines, 2008). I was frustrated with the paradox that while physical activity is required for health, our built environment is not designed for movement, especially for college students. Thus, my syllabus invited students that semester “to integrate physical activity and breathing awareness as a basic human right.” The response was phenomenal! Students embraced whole-heartedly in-class movement with some even commenting that the 15-minute “stretch-segment” was their only physical activity for the week. This experience convinced me that to teach health we must practice health. The following semester I designed a Women & Men’s Health course that included kinesthetic awareness. I titled the class, Promoting Positive Health and focused on mental health, stress, food/nutrition, body image, sexual relationships, smoking, alcohol and other drugs, violence, addiction, and our relationship with nature. Students also learned complex topics such as chronic disease, the immune system, and emerging infectious diseases. They learned health beyond the textbook, through their bodies, in this way answering the question: “Where’s the body in the curriculum?” (Shapiro, 1990).

The potential of teaching health through movement is an opportunity to give students more choices, but there is a catch. Movement, and dance in particular, can awaken mixed feelings of joy and inadequacy. Anna Halprin’s book, *Returning to Health with Dance, Movement and Imagery*, asks educators, “to understand the messages our body is giving us, rather than analyzing or interpreting in a cognitive way.” (Halprin, 2000, p.26) Tamalpa training introduced me to dance as a healing and transformative practice. Tamalpa pedagogy, also called the Life/Art Process, gave me the opportunity to look at each part of my body – and every art medium –as a mirror to reflect and integrate experiences and relationships. In particular, the intermodal “psychokinetic process” and the “three levels of awareness communication model” helped me uncover my “body mythology” through movement, drawing, and writing to study the Self.

### **Embodied Pedagogy**

The courses I teach are highly rated by students from various majors as well as by foreign students and students with disabilities. My student evaluations note an increase in awareness of the complexity involved in bringing about health as a focus. Students comment on the classroom as a space where they feel safe and not judged: “Because of an acceptance towards each other, there is a willingness to listen and share.” “I feel that it is somewhat of an autonomous zone. I don’t feel judged here and I care about the other students in the class.” “Many people seem comfortable just moving and dancing, talking about relationships or body image and getting to know each other. There are so many friendly people here and I think these components create a stronger class bond.”

I have taught and presented my work internationally in different languages and in other cultures, and I find that the Life/Art Process transcends geographical and national boundaries because art is contextual, intercultural, dynamic, and open. Furthermore, the teaching approach is student-centered, critical, and creative. In this time of rapid social change, with fear, divisive attitudes, and a widening gap between those with great

resources and those with few, Daria Halprin (2003) suggests the interface of art, health and healing as an important pathway to live differently:

“The healing arts must be fostered, protected, and passed on as one of humanity’s most significant legacies and bodies of knowledge. When so much of our communication and learning occurs through computer technologies, disembodied living seems ever more inevitable. As our technological capacities grow, we are looking for ways to reconnect with our bodies, our creativity and our spirits.” (p.230)

Echoing African American feminist health activist and writer Audre Lorde’s 1984 essay, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Daria affirms: “Art is as essential to our survival as food, shelter, medicine and the natural environment. It offers a powerful way of learning and communicating knowledge.” (p.230) For this reason, when the opportunity arose to take an second sabbatical, I returned to Tamalpa (2017-2018) to once again study with Daria and learn from the Life/Art Process. This time, however, I participated as a witness, observing not only the teaching approach, but how it had impacted my teaching over the time since I was trained as a Tamalpa Practitioner. We teach who we are (Palmer, 1998); thus, as a woman of color with a complex immigration story and a survivor of childhood trauma as well as domestic violence, my experiences of teaching with the Life/Art Process generate its own particular knowledge.

Understanding the body’s intelligence to resist and mirror the social body makes embodied pedagogy the next frontier of education. Hui Wilcox, drawing on the work of Jacqui Alexander (2006), developed a theoretical framework that connects embodied knowledge to lived experiences, performance, and bodily intelligence. Her research demonstrates qualitative evidence that embodied pedagogies foster a sense of community and challenge Eurocentric male-centered systems of knowledge production predicated upon the body/mind binary. She notes that in the civic arena, activists use embodied pedagogies to provide emotional access to science-based information and to mobilize for social change (Wilcox, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) asks that we “pluralize” our personal story for community resonance. I am aware of the single-story often used to create stereotypes. As the novelist points out on her popular TED talk, “the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.” Expressing the many stories within our own story can “empower, humanize and repair broken dignity.” Stories are important tools to disrupt dualistic thinking that reinforces dichotomies like empowered/victimized, professor as knowledge dispenser/student as vessel. Stories can also be used to destabilize dominant narratives that limit knowledge to a single worldview. Thus, abandoning the traditional formula for scholarship, I use Gloria Anzaldúa's path of *conocimiento* (2015) in order to embrace and grapple with the paradox of privilege within oppression.

I trust art, music, drawing, role-playing, dancing, and creative writing to disrupt the mind/body dualisms that inform dominant, positivist ideas of knowledge production

(Iverson, 2015). Tamalpa training taught me to see my own body as an artist teacher for whom “teaching a subject is not the priority; the priority is to bring out the truth and beauty of each person, as well as in myself” (Otter, 2009). I am curious to connect the healing force of the Tamalpa teaching pedagogy with other forms of liberation education where students participate and co-create their educational experience. In particular, the Brazilians Paolo Freire (1970, 1973) and Augusto Boal (1974) insisted upon an education where students find meaning about the range of subjects in their lives while they built community. Through literacy, critical thinking, and theater making, they advocated teachers to stop “banking education,” and opted for pedagogy infused with art and culture to access health experiences in the body and *new* transformative ways of relating to ourselves and one another.

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