

Learning through movement: program taps into the mind-body relationship

By Michael J. Card

When Bennington College restructured its curriculum, faculty and college objectives back in 1995, administrators said they wanted to emphasize the importance of hands-on learning and interdisciplinary studies. One such field of study that was created out of the new system is the Mind, Body and Behavior Program, a unique cross-disciplinary program that seeks to "define how the mind and body work together."

Although it may seem an ambitious goal to try to analyze and synthesize the body's brain and muscle movements, teachers Peggy Florin and Susan Sgorbati say the point of the program is not to try to find specific answers. Rather, it seeks to reinforce and expand the creative process for students seeking to cultivate artistic, dance and musical talents. They argue that developing a better understanding of how the mind influences the body will help artists, dancers, musicians and even writers to expand their creativity and explore new ways of learning. Citing recent discoveries in the field of neurobiology, the two teachers say there is a much greater link between brain activity and body movement than was previously thought.

"When you break it down, everything we do involves movement," said Florin. "Movement is an essential part of life—it's how we know we are alive. We do it intuitively."

Movement, as opposed to just seeing, hearing or smelling, uses a large amount of muscles throughout the body, all of which trigger certain areas of the most important muscle of all: the brain.

The Mind, Body and Behavior program links the study of movement with creative disciplines such as psychology, art, dance, anthropology, and writing. Although the program cannot currently be taken as a major, many students with majors in the creative arts view the classes as a positive supplement to their other work. In the future, Sgorbati would like to see the program expanded to explore other disciplines.

Sgorbati said Bennington is one of the only colleges to have a curriculum for the study of mind and body, but added that some similar courses are being offered in the "5-college area" (Amherst-Northampton). She said Harvard University has a program on the study of the mind and body, but that it is much more based on scientific theory. "The idea of combining these studies with the process of creative movement is unique to Bennington, and offers many more possibilities than a program focused on finding more concrete answers. We do recommend that students take an introductory biology course, to be familiar with the different systems of the human anatomy," she added.

Sgorbati said the traditional idea that the mind and body are separate entities (made popular by Renaissance philosopher René Descartes) has some serious flaws. She said it seems obvious — especially as a dancer — that the mind and body are continuously communicating with and influencing each other in ways many of us can only experience on a subconscious level. "Every student has their

own laboratory," said Sgorbati. "This program allows you to study what your body is — to get to know your body. This not only helps with the creative process, giving one new ways to explore the body's movement, but it also can help with one's health and general well-being."

She said the intent of the course is not to seek out one particular right or wrong theory of the mind-body connection, but rather "an experimental pursuit to get to know thyself."

Sgorbati said the essence of anyone's movements, from the way they walk to the expressions they make to their posture, is partly affected by learning and memory. As we get older, we do not have time to analyze our movements or to even look at the way we move: we just move the way our body is used to moving. Spending time getting to know your body, and consciously changing movement patterns over time, can result in people breaking their old habits.

The program also seeks to understand how the body is shaped by social constructions such as gender, race or environment. Sgorbati is currently teaching a course with anthropologist Miroslava Prazak, which combines the study of cultural history, philosophy and anthropology with movement. On Tuesday sections, the students meet and discuss theoretical essays about gender and other issues that affect the role of the body. Yesterday students discussed the traditional roles and stereotypes of maleness and femaleness, and how they have changed throughout history. They maintained that these stereotypes limit the ways in which people can view themselves, by setting up a dichotomy based on extremes. They argued that these ingrained preconceptions influence the way each gen-

der acts toward the other, and even how each developed physiologically over history.

On Friday sections the students use movement to address the topics discussed in the Tuesday section.

Sgorbati maintains that movement plays a larger role in triggering memory than any of the five senses. Last spring she and French teacher Agnès Benoit taught a course entitled, "Moving From Words, Speaking Through Movements — and Learning French." The course combined the seemingly incompatible disciplines of dance and foreign language, in an attempt to see if students would remember the words better by acting them out. Instead of the usual methods used to memorize material — such as saying the words out loud or writing them over and over — the two teachers theorized that assigning a movement or action to a word will better reinforce memory, because the experience of the word brings back a number of physical, or "muscle," memories.

In an article about the course that appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor* last year, Isabelle Kaplan, who helped develop the course, said "The class isn't so much to develop fluency, it is to begin to help the student develop a new way to learn that's different from the rational way in regular class." Sgorbati said the students, most of whom had never taken French before, found the movement helpful in learning the foreign words.

Plans for future courses include a class that combines physics and movement: relating quantum theory and movement principles such as inertia, rotation and force will help dancers understand these theories on a much more personal level, she said.