

# **The Embodied Writer: Using Somatic Practice to Challenge Traditional Workshop Structures<sup>1</sup>**

Karen Morash (Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance, London, UK)

5 Forge Way,

Shoreham, Kent TN14 7TG

karen.morash@bruford.ac.uk

<https://orcid.org/my-orcid?orcid=0000-0001-6560-7290>

Dr Karen Morash is Programme Director of the BA Theatre Studies at Rose Bruford, alongside her creative practice in writing and dramaturgy. Her work is situated within collaborative practice, with a particular focus on accessibility and the intersection of writing and devising. Her Cambridge Elements book *Collaboration in Contemporary Performance Texts* is due to be published in 2026, and she is also working on a monograph for Bloomsbury, provisionally titled *Radical Approaches to Writing for Performance: Flying the Garret*. Her writing has been performed in London fringe theatres and festivals, and published in a wide range of literary journals.

## **The Embodied Writer: Using Somatic Practice to Challenge Traditional Workshop Structures**

This paper explores the pedagogic implementation of somatic techniques within creative workshop environments for writers. The usage of somatic and mindful exercises, which are sometimes utilised within performer training, offer significant benefits in emotional and physical regulation and open up creative pathways. By examining two workshops for writers designed by the author and research partners, one for neurodivergent participants and another for more general groups, the article analyses how the combination of somatic exercises and writing tasks equips participants with tools to encourage productive working environments. Simultaneously, this process equips them to think through their bodies, thereby producing work which communicates their unique physical and cognitive experiences. This consideration is underscored by bell hooks's idea of education as a transgressive act, supporting students/participants to be actively engaged in their own development, as opposed to passive learners.

Keywords; creative writing; mindful; somatic; workshops; embodied.

In many of the classes and workshops I lead, I start with an exercise borrowed from my research partner Jessica Andexer, a neuroscience-informed counsellor who uses somatic and mindful practice as part of her therapeutic approach.<sup>2</sup> I begin by telling students/participants that I am giving them suggestions, not instructions, and if they do not want to participate, they can opt out. I get them to check in with their breathing, their heart rate and their general sense of self to ascertain their emotional and physical state: are they sluggish, anxious, or in a calm, ready state? This helps them to become rooted in an awareness of their bodies and emotions before I take them through a series of choices. I give options for a breathing action (for example, simply in through the nose and out through the mouth, or two quick inhalations followed by a slow exhalation, or 'box' breathing),<sup>3</sup> a gaze action (eyes open, closed, unfocused, etc.), and then guide them to do one other simple physical action, such as pressing

their feet to the floor or touching fingers together. There is no hierarchy of suggestions, meaning that I do not imply that one option is better than another. We continue with these three actions for a short time, and then participants choose when to end the movement and return their attention to the group.

Focusing on three actions at once can mean the brain is so occupied that it is not as easily distracted by invasive thoughts, and this simplified meditative process creates a sense of calm, allowing the heart to slow down and for a good intake of oxygen. As someone with ADHD who often struggles with ‘still’ mindful and meditation practices, I find this approach revolutionary, particularly in its ability to help me get into a ready state for tasks which require concentration. This has been confirmed through student feedback, particularly from neurodivergent students, who reported that it helped them to transition into the mental and physical space of the classroom (transitions are often difficult for autistic and ADHD people), and find regulation.<sup>4</sup> On occasions when I did not start a class with this type of activity, they noted that they missed it. It has been my experience, and anecdotally reported to me by students and research participants, that common meditative/relaxation techniques that only focus on one or two actions (for example, breathing) can be uncomfortable or even distressing because the individual might be unable to avoid interruptive thoughts or stimulation, and can feel that they are failing at the exercise because they cannot do it as precisely described. Offering options and multiple actions to safely occupy the brain helps to alleviate this stress. It can also be a useful jumping off point for writing—for example, one could consider the sensation of the fingers pressing together and move on in writing to other images this connects with.

This discovery has resulted in further research, into how the incorporation of somatic elements in creative workshops for writers can have multiple positive impacts. Thomas Hanna is credited with coining the term ‘somatic’, describing it as ‘the body as perceived

from within by first-person perception'.<sup>5</sup> He differentiates between the body as being perceived *externally*, for example, in the field of anatomy, and how we sense the body *from within*, using our proprioception (sensing how the body functions in space). The soma is not precisely the body, but how we sense it.

Something shifts in us cognitively when we observe our bodies — if an individual is told to consider their right elbow, their brain diverts attention from other things to the elbow. Their eyes may move to it, there may be subtle shifts in muscle, nerves and joints because of the brain's attention, and there may even be some emotions or memories included if the person is self-conscious about the shape or previously injured it; somatic practice is, in essence, phenomenological. Some of this, as Hanna points out, is based in conscious, volitional functions, but other functions are unlearned and involuntary. However, the involuntary functions can be 'incorporated into the volitional system by the selective use of awareness to isolate the unlearned function and, by association, *learn* it'.<sup>6</sup> Breathing is an involuntary action, but conscious attention to our breath can allow us to alter it, and consider how its function is connected to other parts of our body and our emotional wellbeing. Focusing on the body can also shift our brain away from unhelpful thoughts and emotions, which can aid participants to move from feelings of nervousness or insecurity to a calm state.

As Tara Horst argues, when we learn somatically, it is 'felt by the body', yet it is not always easy to define that knowledge in rational terms.<sup>7</sup> Whilst somatic practice can be instructed (or, more precisely, guided), the knowledge gained through the movement comes from our interiorised responses and is sometimes difficult to communicate within standard disembodied linguistic systems. For this reason, arts practices—including dancing, acting, visual arts, music, creative writing and more—can be more appropriate forms for communicating somatic knowledge in abstract ways. Somatic practice is a long-standing component of performer training, functioning as an umbrella term for movement-based

systems such as Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique, Laban, and others, which utilise reflective, kinaesthetic and experiential techniques to help actors establish a mind-body connection. As Kate Kohler Amory describes, somatic techniques help actors to ‘repattern habits in the body-mind that limit the students’ ability to fully embody a role’ and this work helps to mine ‘the wisdom of the body directly for creative material’.<sup>8</sup> However, somatic techniques are rarely used within writer training, despite the fact that they can be useful tools for stimulation and development of creative practice, enabling writers to consider our world from different, more embodied, perspectives. My research offers a productive challenge to traditional, disembodied methods of developing writers, arguing that somatic techniques not only spark the imagination but enable writers to get into a calm and focused state, ready to undertake creative work.

At the heart of this query is the idea of transgressive education, inspired by bell hooks, who argues that good pedagogy should offer ‘the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts’ where those involved are ‘active participants in their own learning’;<sup>9</sup> there is a satisfying congruity in this with the exploratory and reflective nature of somatic practice. hooks’s conceptualisation (drawing on Paulo Freire) challenges the notion of a “‘banking system” of education, that approach to learning that is rooted in the notion that all students need to do is consume information fed to them by a professor’.<sup>10</sup> My research focuses on using the body via somatic practice to enable participants in writing workshops to actively find regulation and undertake creative exploration and self-actualisation in their own terms, as opposed to being passive, inactive recipients of instruction on how to write/create.

These explorations are inspired by my own experiences in a multitude of creative workshops and teaching environments, including those I have run myself.<sup>11</sup> I am a writer and dramaturg, but have also performed and directed, and undertaken programmes of study and workshops related to those activities. Much of my thinking on this topic derives from finding

workshops beneficial, but also sometimes feeling physically and mentally uncomfortable and creatively restrained whilst participating, which has led me to look for alternative approaches that consider both the imagination and the body. In general, when, like hooks, we engage in a ‘questing for a union of mind, body and spirit’,<sup>12</sup> we open new creative pathways, sharing with others how we experience the world in our own unique way. It can also ameliorate barriers some people, particularly neurodivergent people, experience in workshops.<sup>13</sup> Some physical and mental discomfort in creative practice can be useful and lead to discoveries and expanded understanding. However, it is also important that we have control over the level of discomfort we are exposed to and the ability to take action when being uncomfortable is not productive or leads to dysregulation, which can then shut down creative exploration and thinking.

This flexible, low-demand approach informs the structuring of the workshops for neurodivergent creative writers I run with Andexer, which include people of all levels of experience of writing. We advertise the workshops within both the writing and neurodivergent communities, promoting the sessions as opportunities for writers to learn somatic techniques that will help them to develop their writing practice. In the sessions, which take place online, Andexer leads participants through different physical exercises, designed for close focus on particular body parts, or investigating how body-brains interact with certain spaces and textures. These somatic exercises could also be termed ‘mindful’ in that they are designed to help participants be calm, establish focus, and quietly consider what is happening with their body. Participants are offered non-hierarchical choices, including the choice to do nothing at all, and are not told *how* they should be experiencing the practice. What we have discovered is that this approach, which allows participants to be in control of what they do in a space where they feel comfortable, has increased participation; few opt out of the exercises.

I follow Alexander's somatic proposals with writing exercises (also optional), usually connected thematically or drawing on an aspect of the somatic work. For example, following an exercise involving soothing and gentle self-touch combined with saying compassionate words and phrases, first directed towards themselves and then out to others, I suggested to participants that they could write a letter to themselves, someone they knew, or an imagined character — and the results were moving and powerful, with the combined exercises identified as being cathartic by participants. Usually, I do not dictate the form of the writing; even a letter can be verse, prose, dialogue, etc. If participants do not engage with my prompt they can do something else, or nothing at all. They can handwrite, write into their computer, or even draw if they prefer; we also consider how the physical actions of writing/drawing can themselves be regulating. Afterwards, they can choose to share, either in the chat, on a Padlet I set up for the sessions or by reading out loud. No critique is offered, but we, and the participants, can respond by mentioning something we liked, simply saying thank you, or even producing a movement, sound, or image, again emphasising the mind-body connection and the legitimacy of an embodied response. Participants are aware in advance that we will not offer critique; many neurodivergent people suffer from rejection sensitivity dysphoria and knowing that they will not have to process criticism can enable them to be more relaxed.<sup>14</sup>

The writing produced can be complete in itself, a starting point for further work, or simply just a meditative exercise. Participants interviewed after the workshops reported using some of the exercises, both the somatic and the writing, as ways to enhance their creative work and enter a calm, focused state. Crucially, participants have also noted an increased awareness of how their bodies operate in space and a connection between what their bodies were experiencing and the images and feelings they were able to relate in their writing. Therefore, not only does this help participants to relax, focus, and produce writing, but it seems to help them to find proprioceptive and interoceptive (feeling and understanding inner

sensations such as hunger or emotion) vocabularies. Our research is ongoing, and this altered awareness, particularly important for neurodivergent people, is a specific area for further exploration.

But what is the connection between somatic practice and neurodivergence?

Neurodivergent people, especially those with autism, ADHD and dyspraxia, often struggle with proprioception and interoception.<sup>15</sup> It is less that they do not in fact experience these sensations, but rather that they may find it difficult to identify or imagine them. If a neurotypical person considers a character who was feeling hot and irritated, they are often able to conceptualise those experiences in their mind and body, using imaginative processes to find vocabulary to express them. Some neurodivergent people do not visualise or process in this way. Crucially, this can be interpreted as a lack of imagination, particularly for autistic people, but this, as we have seen in our workshops, is inaccurate—whilst they may have different ways of accessing conceptual information, autistic individuals do have imaginative capabilities. It is a difference, not a deficit. The workshops that Andexer and I run are designed to acknowledge these different types of thinking whilst enabling participants to find new, embodied ways of expressing themselves that tap into their unique cognitive capabilities.

This seems to me to be a missing link in many writing workshops in general, given the importance in the creative arts of portraying the inner and physical world of humans. However, the idea of embodied writing has not gone entirely unrecognised. John Schulz, who originated the ‘Story Workshop Method’ in the USA in the 1960s and ’70s, argued that all writing derives from ‘image and movement of voice organizing the expression of perceptions through time’.<sup>16</sup> He reminded his students of how the body is involved in the delivery of oral narratives—the teller usually includes gesture, and the more involved the gesture, the better and more precisely the story is communicated. He noted that getting students to take a more

physicalised approach to delivering stories also meant they narrativised in the present tense, giving the story immediacy, an intriguing link to somatic practice which also encourages participants to be in the present moment.

Apart from Schulz, I have found few other examples of writing workshops that incorporate what might be called somatic practice; my research partners and I are therefore creating our own models. For example, in 2022, I took a production of a devised piece of work which I directed, called *Another Time This Time*, to the Ledbury Poetry Festival and a conference at King's College London. The production was created using an experiential approach to translating a script by John London and Kit Danowski into performance. The text was a series of isolated words, numbers and images associated with historical or fictional pandemics, and the actors and I developed the performance using various techniques, including somatic exercises. Alongside the performances, I designed two workshops for both venues, advertising them as an opportunity to explore the translation of words into movement and movement back into words.<sup>17</sup>

In the workshops, the two actors from the show, Johanna Jacobi and Philip Magee, demonstrated how they could take isolated words from London and Danowski's script, selected by participants, and explore the sounds, images and textures evoked by the chosen words. This was not just about the meaning of the words, but the *feel* of the words within the body. They created very short movement and sound responses, modelling to the participants how one word can be experienced in complex ways through the body. Participants were then invited to undertake free writing about their own experiences of pandemic (including, but not limited to, the Covid-19 pandemic). We repeated the process, with words drawn out from the participants' writing, and they were invited to explore their words through somatic movement, or to get the actors to do the exploration for them. Again, I took a low-demand approach: no one was forced to write or read their work, or to join in with any movement. I

also did not assume that participants would feel comfortable undertaking physical work, so the actors were able to be their proxies if needed, guided by the participants discussing their internalised response to a particular word. Participants were then given the opportunity to write more in response. The actors used this work to develop movements linked to the participants' words, which were incorporated into the evening's performance, meaning participants could see their words somatically interpreted in the actors' bodies on stage.

As London says, the 'exploratory nature of these workshops made them heuristic rather than one-sided or hierarchical'; participants were guided by me, London and the actors, but equally we were guided by what they produced.<sup>18</sup> Rather than critiquing the participants' work, we responded through the body, something participants indicated in workshop discussions was satisfying in terms of seeing their written words interpreted in ways they had not experienced before. It also provided them with techniques to consider how words can be somatically experienced — a useful tool when a writer is feeling blocked, and, it seems, a fairly radical (though clearly not unwelcome) exercise in writing workshops.

As suggested, my research in this area is ongoing, but evidence thus far indicates that using somatic techniques not only assists workshop participants with getting into a ready state for writing, but also encourages the idea that words are complex mechanisms that can be experienced in ways that go far beyond writing or speaking. When words travel through our bodies, which are then used as tools to communicate our individual somatic experiences, they not only help us to understand ourselves better, but also aid in transmitting our experiences and perception of the world in multi-layered ways to others. As Elliot Eisner says, 'education is a process of learning how to become the architect of your own experience and therefore learning how to create yourself'.<sup>19</sup> Combining words and movement is emblematic of the mind-body connection and can play a significant role in enabling individuals to creatively express their unique ways of being and seeing.

## Data Statement

There is no data set associated with this work.

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

## Funding

No funding was received for this work.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This research includes human subjects and the work has been approved by the Rose Bruford College Research Integrity and Ethics Committee.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Andexer's work, visit <https://bearinmind.online/>

<sup>3</sup> 'Box' breathing involves a pattern of: inhalation, breath held in, exhalation, breath held out, with each stage having the same count, for example 4x4x4x4.

<sup>4</sup> By 'neurodivergent' I mean, using Nick Walker's definition, a person whose brain 'functions in ways which diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of "normal"'. Nick Walker, *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities* (Fort Worth, TX: Autonomous Press, 2021), p. 21. Definitions of regulation vary, but for the purposes of our work I see it as being in a state where the nervous system is not overstimulated by sensory or emotional input, or other types of information; understimulation can also lead to dysregulation in some neurodivergent individuals. Regulation allows individuals to be in a calm, ready state.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hanna, 'What is Somatics?', <https://somatics.org/library/htl-wis1>, accessed 29 May 2025, p. 341.

<sup>6</sup> Hanna, p. 352.

<sup>7</sup> Tara Horst, 'The Body in Adult Education: Introducing a Somatic Learning Model', Adult Education Research Conference, <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2008/papers/28>, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Kate Kohler Amory, 'Acting for the Twenty-first Century: A Somatic Approach to Contemporary Actor Training', *Perfformio* 1, 2, pp. 5-20, pp. 10-11.

<sup>9</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> hooks, p. 14

<sup>11</sup> To specify, by 'creative workshop' I mean a small, organised assemblage of individuals, led by at least one person, who engage in directed exercises with the intention of learning skills and developing creative work. For a brief history of the playwrights' workshop in particular, see Karen Morash, 'Resituating the Writer's Workshop: Collective Strategies for Playwriting Pedagogy', *Critical Stages* 26 (December 2022) [<https://www.critical-stages.org/26/resituating-the-writers-workshop-collective-strategies-for-playwriting-pedagogy/>].

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<sup>12</sup> hooks, p. 16

<sup>13</sup> Some of the barriers our neurodivergent research participants have mentioned experiencing in previous workshops include enforced sharing and participation; expectations of quick understanding of complicated concepts; unhelpful criticism/feedback; lack of advance information about activities; and being physically uncomfortable in the space.

<sup>14</sup> Rejection sensitivity dysphoria is a ‘complex and intense [...] emotional response that occurs when someone feels a perceived or real rejection or criticism’, which is ‘seen in almost all patients with ADHD’. Dr Shyamal Mashru, in conversation with Henry Shelford, ‘Episode 4: Deep Dive into Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria’, *ADHD Deep Dives* [<https://adhduk.co.uk/deep-dives/https-adhduk-co-uk-deep-dives-episode-4-deep-dive-into-rejection-sensitivity-dysphoria-with-henry-shelford-and-dr-shyamal-mashru/>], accessed 28 February 2026.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly Birtwell, Jessica Andexer and Emily Corsellis, ‘Autism Sensitive Mindfulness-based Programmes’, in Li, Griffith, and Zhu, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Third-Wave Psychotherapies*. Palgrave Macmillan (author-accepted manuscript, May 2025), p. 9. It is important to note that each neurodivergent person experiences sensory input differently.

<sup>16</sup> John Schulz, ‘The Story Workshop Method: Writing from Start to Finish’, *College English*, 39, 4 (1977), pp. 411–36, p. 412.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed outline of the workshops, see John London, ‘Experiencing Performance and Performing Experience: Translation, Fragmentation and Composition on Stage, in Theory and in Practice’ in Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal, eds., *The Experience of Translation: Materiality and Play in Experiential Translation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), pp. 37–57, pp. 51–52. I ran the workshop at the Ledbury Poetry Festival, but was unable to attend the King’s College workshop, (ironically) due to having the Covid-19 virus. John London facilitated that workshop, using my plans. By referring to ‘translation’ here, I am situating myself within a dramaturgical construction of the idea of taking something in one form (for example, written text) and re-interpreting it in another form (for example, live performance), maintaining core aspects of the original, but creating something new. I discuss this at length in my chapter ‘When you Don’t Speak the Language: The Role of the Dramaturg in Collaborative Translation’, in Enza De Francisci and Cristina Marinetti, eds., *Translation in the Performing Arts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025), pp. 79–95.

<sup>18</sup> London, p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> Elliot Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 24.