



# Building Community with a Kinesthetic Classroom

## SUMMARY

Kinesthetic learning is demystified through this author's insightful discussion on movement as a method for meaningful learning in the classroom. She explores the language of movement, provides clear examples of its use through specific activities, and draws important connections between movement and social-emotional learning.

### *Children by nature*

are movers, they learn quickly and implicitly through kinesthetic and tactile experiences (Dunn & Honigfeld, 2009). Creative movement is a remarkable way of teaching and learning cognitive and affective skills and improving physical, mental, and social and emotional health. Cross curriculum lesson plans that incorporate movement are an excellent tool to assist students with relating and internalizing the various subjects much more clearly. Because information that is abstract and hard to follow can be made concrete in a student's mind through movement, the outcome is filled with extensive learning experiences. Because movement is organic and generated through self-discovery, each student can choose how they want to move. The learning objective, however, can be very focused on anything from the design of the solar system to

concentric circles. With planned integration, the teacher is attentive to the curricular objectives yet open to what naturally develops out of the students' enthusiastic curiosity and willingness to participate. The resulting lessons are interdisciplinary, cross curricular, and involve students naturally.

Current research correlates arts education to academic achievement and supports the theory that cognitive and affective concepts taught through movement activities are successfully learned and retained (Deasy, 2002). When students are stressed, feeling overwhelmed or insecure, it is challenging for them to learn, which sometimes results in negative classroom behavior. Moving rhythmically rids the student of anxiety and relieves muscular rigidity. Conversely, it increases energy and focus. Movement supports emotional and cognitive understanding because it forces students to open up

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their minds through physical expression. By associating a movement to a concept, this type of learning experience helps to bridge verbal and non-verbal communication to assure that new information will be retained in long-term memory; therefore it is highly likely to be recalled. The individual's physiological change alters the classroom atmosphere. Students learn how to convey their emotional feelings through movement and cognitively learn how their self representation affects others around them. As students become comfortable in the group, they begin to feel secure enough to take risks. Moving together creates strong personal connections with a common purpose, opens communication, and encourages collaboration. Moving creatively with an awareness of self and others' personal space inspires mutual respect, caring, and community. The classroom culture then shifts creating a safe, welcoming environment that is more conducive to learning.

Movement in the classroom is universal and inclusive: it can open doors for students with diverse needs and abilities, as well as students in traditional

settings. The following encounter was my third visit with a group of students aged 12-18 with Down Syndrome:

*The classroom was filled with bodies moving in different directions, tempos, and dynamics. I called, "Freeze." Suddenly, the space was motionless as students held a static pose. I announced, "Pay attention to your body shape...are your arms and legs reaching or crossed? Are you standing up high or crouching low?" In previous visits, they introduced themselves by pantomiming their chores and recreation interests. We discussed how they felt about themselves and practiced creative movement options (see Figures 1-3). On this day, I hoped to combine their feelings with movements. "Some of you mentioned that people laugh because they don't understand you. Show me in a body shape how that feels." One boy sat on the floor and faced the wall. The entire group's movements were low, slow, closed, and hidden. Then I encouraged them to talk about what it feels like to be accepted. They shared times of feeling loved and part of a team. The resulting movement was*

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*open, high, and much faster. “Freeze and hold the shape,” I called, “...and relax. Now, create a shape that shows me how you want to feel.” They all formed high, open shapes. I continued, “Reach and physically connect a body part to someone near you.” The students connected elbow to ankle, wrist to knee. “Freeze and hold. I want you to carry this feeling with you. If someone laughs, remember this shape and know how much you appreciate yourself and each other.”*

In any aspect of education, kinesthetic and tactile lessons allow for first hand experiential learning. Through involvement in the program’s structured activities, the students continued to express their feelings and expand their emotional range. It was a compelling moment that empowered everyone in the classroom. A simple circle dance brought about a profound sense of belonging. Working in groups fostered mutual respect and cooperation. This was just one of many scenarios where I’ve witnessed the transforming power of creative movement.

### **The Benefits of a Moving Classroom**

Movement activities work well, in conjunction with, and as a compliment to traditional book learning. Kinesthetic

and tactile lessons provide an implicit learning opportunity for critical thinking, analysis, organization, and problem solving, and can be in fact, much more reliable at helping students to retain knowledge than reading textbooks and memorizing facts alone (Reber, 1993). Through movement activities students have an immediate opportunity to experience, observe, examine, and reflect on decision making by using body-based language to activate the mind and body as an integrated whole. Students recognize more clearly the details of their physical and emotional responses to a situation. By analyzing their movement choices, students become more open-minded, respectful, tolerant, and accepting of assessment.

Movement activities encourage proper alignment/posture, endurance, and balance. In addition, Eric Jensen (1998) suggests a correlation between movement and emotions. Sensory motor experiences provide a direct link from the cerebellum to the emotional and pleasure centers in the brain. Exercise has a direct positive effect on brain chemistry, raising levels of endorphins, adrenaline, serotonin, and dopamine. Consequently, students who show responsibility for the conditioning and care of their bodies may have a positive attitude and ultimately a healthier life style. The *Blue*

*Print for Teaching and Learning in the Arts* (2007) affirms as well that movement embedded in classroom learning enhances psychomotor development and physically develops self-control and refinement of gross motor skills. Students not only learn to recognize and trust their impulses, but to act on or contain them as they choose. It also suggests an understanding of the relationship between bodies and personal space which guides students with suitable responses to a crowded room or inappropriate touch. As a form of self-expression, creative movement is a release and a social tool that primes the brain for new ideas (Jensen, 2001).

When children are exploring through their senses, they have an aesthetic frame for expressing feeling — a positive alternative to many destructive choices. Psychologist and author Daniel Goleman (1995) popularized the term “emotional intelligence” or EQ in his landmark-selling book, *Emotional Intelligence*. Goleman describes emotional intelligence as the capacity of recognizing our own feelings and the feelings of others for motivating ourselves and managing emotions in our own relationships. He believes that EQ is developed by acquiring skills through five dimensions: self-awareness, managing



emotions, motivation, empathy, and social skills. When children engage in movement individually they obtain a diverse movement vocabulary that assists with physical functions and expands emotional responses to certain situations. When people move in groups or in a classroom environment they achieve a new level and a new found maturity in social interactions and with emotional expression. In both cases, children experience each component of Goleman’s emotional intelligence, resulting in better organization and problem solving, recognizing options, developing coping skills, increasing focus and concentration, increased self-esteem and cultural literacy, recognizing strengths, improving critical thinking and analytical skills, in addition to learning successful cooperation and teamwork.

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# Building Community with a Kinesthetic Classroom

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## From Pedagogy to Practice

*The Dance/Movement Education: Emerging Theories* project is supported by the SUNY Research Foundation Incentive grant. The goal and purpose of this research was to discover significant trends in movement education.

Community partners from classroom and after-school recreation settings in Buffalo were interviewed. Next, original psychomotor, cognitive, and affective skill building lesson plans specific to the needs of their underserved populations were designed. Cognitive and affective concepts taught through movement activities were successfully learned and retained.

Classroom students had fun as they willingly used movement in a learning environment. In 15 minutes students understood the food chain through a game of leap frog. The participating teachers enjoyed observing the process and noted it was a meaningful activity for students. One teacher commented, “I was amazed at how quickly students could learn new topics through kinesthetic activities.” Teachers also remarked on how the classroom community demonstrated self-esteem, empathy, and respect. “They seemed proud of what they did and more open to taking risks. After only two sessions

some of my reluctant risk takers were in there taking guesses and giving answers.” Another teacher observed, “At first it was hard for them to show emotion on cue. I even commented, ‘Amazing how all day long you show your emotions but on cue you can’t.’” The teacher noted later students were able to recall behaviors and control their emotions.

## The Tools to Create Comfort or Teaching Tools

The question surfaced — if learning cognitive and affective skills through movement activities is successful and enjoyable why is it not more widely used as a means of instruction in the classroom? Every day movements form the basis for creating kinesthetic lessons. We move every day. By implementing movement in a meaningful way, teachers can bring aesthetic, cultural, social, and historical values to the classroom. With an understanding of the basic tools, every teacher can design consequential lessons.

Movement lessons can ultimately create comfort and persuade change by encouraging participants to consider basic motions by starting small.

It is helpful to begin with the vocabulary of movement. There are three fundamental ways of moving:

- Shape — an interrelated arrangement of body parts of one person or group.
- Axial — movements around ones' own axis.
- Locomotor — traveling movements that traverse a space.

Each can be linked to cognitive and affective skills. By calling out correlated movement suggestions, teachers coach their students to simulate an academic or social concept. The following three examples offer suggestions for how to create movement that best reflects the concepts so that ideas transfer to learning.

**Activity 1:** The Director — this activity uses shaping to focus on clear communication but can easily be used for addressing leadership, vocabulary, and patience. All of these skills assist with developing healthy relationships. Students are placed in groups of three. One student is the director, one the shape maker, and one the blind-folded person.

- The blind-folded person stands with his or her back to the shape maker as to not see the shape.
- The shape maker forms his or her body into an interesting shape.
- The director must instruct the

blind folded person to get into the shape by using descriptive words. It is very important not to use gesture to show or use touch to guide the blind folded person.

**Activity 2:** Physical Telephone — this activity incorporates gestures to address the malice of gossip. By seeing how small changes in the process affect the final outcome, students develop personal responsibility and empathy. It also requires focus, absorbing information quickly, and memory. Students stand in a line facing the back of the person in front of them, as if waiting in line.

- The last person in line, taps the person in front of them on the shoulder. The student turns around and is shown four gestures.
- Without talking or repeating the gestures, he or she turns and taps the next person in line and repeats what he or she saw. This continues down the line.
- When the gestures reach the person at the front of the line, that person and the person who initiated the gestures face the group and simultaneously perform.

**Activity 3:** Circles — this activity entails moving around a concentric circle pattern to discriminate different

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## Shaping

### Placing body parts into different points of the kinesphere

- High/Medium/Low
- Closed/Open
- Symmetrical/Asymmetrical
- Real/Abstract

## Axial

### Movement around ones' own axis

- Gesture
- Stretch
- Twist
- Curve
- Swing
- Drop

# Building Community with a Kinesthetic Classroom

## Choreographic Elements

Element	Example	Example	Example
Space	level	direction	spatial pattern
Time	tempo	rhythm	pause
Energy	direct, indirect	strong, light	sustained, sudden

Laban's Effort Actions

degrees of intimacy and is also excellent for learning about the solar system and molecular structure. By understanding the relationship between bodies, students come to respect personal space. Students engage in a conversation on the various relationships they have with people in their lives. A pre-drawn concentric circle pattern is used to represent social distance.

- The teacher calls out one relationship (ex. friend) and asks the students to move to what they believe to be the appropriate circle. The students apply locomotor movement that indicates the relationship.
- The student creates a shape that also signifies the relationship.
- Another relationship title is called. The students move to the suitable circle and pose.

- The teacher asks one student to make eye contact with another student and gesture in an appropriate way.
- This continues and the students adapt their movements and gestures accordingly.

Although the lessons are specific, they provide a framework of content and strategies for lesson development and implementation. As always it is important to tailor the lesson based on the key concept being taught, the student population being addressed and the context of the specific learning environment.

## Conclusion

Kinesthetic learning can be applied as a method to help students develop affective and cognitive skills. It is research based and its purpose is extensive, encompassing psychomotor and social-emotional concepts. Creative movement conveys to students the social and emotional attributes of self-awareness, social awareness, and self management that instill a deep connection to and understanding of self, others, and community. Movement has the capacity to reach a diverse range of students and can be incorporated across the curriculum as an integral tool for learning.

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