

Positive effects of a physical theater class on body schema among college students

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Despite the numerous exercise benefits, physical activity tends to drastically decline at college, especially among freshmen women. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception (1945/2014), bodily movement is the only way to develop a well-balanced body schema as motor habit (pre-reflective inter-sensorial unity) which facilitates skill acquisition, mobility, and the love of movement. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study was to examine the effects of a semester-long physical theater class (twice/week, 1.5 hours/time) on body schema (e.g., body posture, awareness, confidence, and expression) among eight college students (4 males, 4 females; Mage = 20.13). The class content included physically demanding, playful, embodied exercises (e.g., aerial dance, calisthenics, and stage combat). Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted twice (beginning and end of the semester) to qualitatively collect the study's data. Sample interview questions included exercise levels, mobility and physicality, and bodily expression. Based on the qualitative/phenomenological data analysis, two themes emerged showcasing how the participants' body schema improved. Based on the first theme, body schema Improvement: body posture, confidence, awareness, physicality in expression, the students emphasized the importance of physical theater in improving body posture, awareness, confidence and comfort during physical theater and their daily functions. Practically learning the body schema of their character was key to excellence in performance. Based on the second theme, body schema improvement: corporeally and naturally expressing emotions, the students learned how to express emotions using their whole body and not only their face. They also managed to switch emotions naturally and corporeally. Experts in Kinesiology and performing arts should promote embodied, holistic, playful, and physically demanding movement programs for improved body schema.