Applications of Embodied Imagination: teaching performing arts by way of Embodied Imagination and Complexity Theory by Rebecca Hall

“Health is not integration. Health is the ability to stand in the spaces between realities without losing any of them. This is what I believe self-acceptance means and what creativity is really all about - the capacity to feel like one self while being many.” Philip M. Bromberg, Ph.D. [Contemporary Psychoanalysis, Vol. 39, No.4 (2003) p. 700]

Embodied Imagination [EI] is steeped in the tradition of Phenomenology which is the study of an individual's lived experience of the world. Phenomena are experiences that we get from the senses, what we see, taste, smell, touch, hear and feel. Developed through work with Shakespearean actors, Embodied Imagination [EI] enhances the capacity for dual consciousness and the ability to hold multiple states simultaneously—essential skills for any performer.

EI is a valuable creative companion for those developing performing arts skills and sensibilities. This is why I chose to incorporate EI methods into my teaching practice. A key characteristic of Embodied Imagination (EI) is the *perspective* you inhabit. To introduce EI concepts to my students, I first established the *self-state perspective* (egosyntonic), gradually stretching and expanding their awareness to encompass dual consciousness.

The following case study references a cohort of Performing Arts students engaged in a nationally recognised and certified training program in Australia in 2023. To preserve their privacy, I have used pseudonyms. The students, aged 17 to 29, participated in Embodied Imagination (EI) work over a four-month period, with classes held on two consecutive days each week. None of the students had previously encountered embodiment practices or Embodied Imagination. The program was designed to provide an entry-level vocational qualification in the performing arts. The class had a diverse learner profile, encompassing individuals from various cultural backgrounds, neurodivergent students, and those

with a range of physical, intellectual, and neurological disabilities, as well as mental health issues among the nine students.

My intention in using Embodied Imagination with these students was to cultivate participation with emergent impulses (Other) and to encourage the expression of these impulses through the body as a creative force. To begin I primed their systems, setting the scene by establishing a routine of guided meditation. I did this to evaluate both group and individual tolerances for inner-directed focusing and their capacity to maintain stillness, as a means of assessing the suitability of Embodied Imagination for this cohort of students.

The students responded enthusiastically to the guided meditations, so I introduced an embodied self-state awareness activity. I turned off the classroom lights and asked them to stay on their individual yoga mats and move in the dark to various songs, encouraging them to focus on how the music felt in their bodies rather than on their thoughts or memories associated with it. The darkened room was intended to minimise self- consciousness and shift emphasis away from vision, allowing their other senses to become more attuned. I instructed them to tune into their bodily sensations and notice the movement within, and to only move when they felt a compelling impulse arise from within their bodies.

The assessment criteria for a Dance unit required students to perform improvised movements in response to a music stimulus, with a focus on demonstrating rhythmic awareness. To evoke less habituated responses I chose a song without lyrics. Sia, an adept and experienced dancer, expressed her anxiety, saying, “I’m a lyrical dancer, I’ve never danced to a song without lyrics; I don’t know how!” After introducing the music stimulus and approach, we performed a *body scan* and then listened to the selected song by sensing into its atmosphere and rhythm. According to EI theory, *all the information is contained within the impulse*. Therefore, I instructed the participants to feel the music in their bodies, notice where the impulse to move originated, and let spontaneous movement emerge from that impulse.

The song ‘In Der-Wuste’ by the artist Kalabrese provided an atmospheric soundscape with distinct rhythmic sections, inviting students to connect with imagery and challenging them to explore perspectives beyond their habitual responses. Mary and Sia described imagery of rainforest animals, creating a narrative and *micro-moving* like those animals. In accordance with EI theory, *linear narratives reflect habitual consciousness*. Therefore, I instructed the students to disregard narrative constructs, sense into the soundscape-world, allow it to influence and move their bodies, and stay attuned to *emergent impulses*. My intent was to avoid role-play and instead foster exploration and discovery of body intelligence. This approach aimed to cultivate an attuned embodied response that emerged spontaneously from the music-stimulus landscape, rather than being a reflex of intellect or the habitual self-state. I also aimed to introduce EI concepts gradually to navigate the learner-profile appropriately.

The performances took place in the campus theatre, in collaboration with the theatre tech and screen students who managed the lighting, sound, and camera operation. Complexity Theory networks were employed to provide a scaffold for the improvised piece, eliminating the need for a designated leader. According to Complexity Theory, *a self-organising system is inherently adaptive*, so the 'choreography' was decentralised with a fluid structure. This challenged the students to remain present and sustain awareness of both the whole and its individual components simultaneously. Music cues were used to signal transitions between solo, pair, and ensemble segments, while the performers’ embodied impulses provided the cues for solo performances. This required the participants to be highly attuned to each other and the present moment, relying on their senses rather than their memories. Phenomenology in action. The familiarity of the song served as the EI self-state container, providing a grounding element for the students. The rhythmic segments effectively delineated solo, pair, and ensemble performances. The Complexity Theory network scaffold provided sufficient structure for the lighting and camera plots, meeting the technical needs of the crew, and the students performed brilliantly.

In a different Dance unit assessment, students were assigned to perform improvised movement inspired by an image-stimulus. I plan to explore this process more deeply in a forthcoming article, where I will discuss the use of EI *transits*, the establishment of *anchor points*, and the various iterations of the Complexity Theory scaffold employed in teaching acting, voice and musical theatre units.

For this particular iteration, I chose to use the same piece of music for consistency, as the scaffold of sound cues were already embedded within the students' neural frameworks and body memory (egosyntonic/self-state). I used EI methods to transit the students by way of an animal picture they selected, allowing it to inform their movement. This exercise reinforced their awareness and understanding of dual consciousness. By employing the same scaffold, the contrast between their movements in the first iteration (egosyntonic/ self-state) and second iteration (egodystonic/Other) became clearly evident. Their movements became more spontaneous and organic, less contrived and predictable. The prominence of their habitual movement styles diminished, allowing their bodies to move with greater expressiveness and display more emergent impressions rather than habitual patterns. For instance, Ari embraced this method so fully that he transitioned from refusing to participate at all to delivering a captivating performance, exploring expressive movement and performing with confidence. At the beginning of term, Ari, Leanne and Mary claimed they couldn't dance and were often frozen and disengaged. By the end of the term, they were freely exploring both locomotive and non-locomotive movement styles, openly discovering new ways of moving to music and non-music stimuli. It brought tears to my eyes. Sia's *transit* into the image-stimulus for example, revealed much information, and the rich characterisation that developed through subsequent iterations led to a captivating movement performance that displayed authentic Otherness.

Overall the students participated enthusiastically in cultivating an awareness of Other, despite initial resistance from some. The stretch point was different for each individual, and collectively as a network, they supported one another in tolerating unfamiliar (egodystonic) perspectives whilst enduring the discomfort of

stepping out of their self-state (egosyntonic) perspective; thus building resilience.

The Complexity Theory scaffold, combined with EI processes, stretched the students and applied sustained pressure, which appeared to evoke fresh perspectives and access to new internal resources. This experience significantly enhanced their capacity for adaptation and resilience. Utilising the image-stimulus EI *anchor point* enabled the performers to easily get into the zone and manage performance anxiety effectively, unveiling previously untapped potential. Before the assessment performance, I instructed them to locate the *anchor point* within their bodies. I observed how their expressions shifted from anxiety to clarity and purpose, as they instantly regained composure.

In summary, Embodied Imagination (EI) proved a useful tool for this cohort of students, helping them overcome inhibitions, mitigate mental health challenges, boost confidence, and reveal latent creative potential. "I've never experienced anything like this in my whole life. I lost myself in the animal movement," remarked one student, reflecting on their experience with the EI image-stimulus exercise. The Complexity Theory scaffold facilitated a *self-organising, adaptive system* that transformed potential chaos into cohesive and meaningful performances. The use of an EI *anchor point* proved invaluable as performance anxiety escalated, threatening to dismantle their composure; these anchor points immediately restored their sense of readiness and focus. EI not only enriched their performing arts skills and sensibilities and enhanced their engagement in class, but also fostered new avenues for character development. EI's effectiveness in promoting adaptability, personal agency, and an experience of multiple perspectives was evident throughout the process. Some students faced significant challenges in decision-making, such as selecting movement styles or choosing an animal image, and appeared almost paralysed by uncertainty. However, employing Embodied Imagination techniques softened their paralysis, enabling them to navigate these difficulties with greater ease.

By slowing down, attuning to bodily sensations, and focusing on intuitive impulses in the context of exploring Other (egodystonic), these students encountered new ways of knowing. Instilling an awareness of possibilities and providing tangible evidence through lived experiences that one can embrace change safely. This underscores EI's simultaneous role in enhancing creative performance and supporting overall well-being, echoing Bromberg's assertion to **'stand in the spaces'** and **'feel like one self while being many'.**