

The following article was published in Arco, the journal of the European String Teachers Association UK, in 2016.

Introducing The Feldenkrais Method: a fresh perspective on playing, teaching, learning, and so-called ‘talent’.

Aged 58 I embarked on a four year training in the Feldenkrais Method. Why? Because a handful of Feldenkrais lessons had miraculously liberated my playing, opening up a fresh pathway of development and potential at a time when I might have expected my progress to slow down.

I had never seen myself as particularly ‘talented’, any achievement being due to good teaching, intense application and countless hours of practice. After those Feldenkrais lessons I began to get an inkling what this elusive quality - ‘talented’ - might feel like, often in surprising and unexpected ways. I needed to understand how a mysterious little-known method had awakened such a sense of potential, and I wanted to be able to share the benefit with others.

The physically ‘talented’ players I have known appear to function effortlessly. It seems as if they do not put mental or physical obstacles in their own way, and they absorb each new skill with relaxed confidence. They give the impression that they have been born with their neurons ready and eager to connect, allowing actions to obey intentions seamlessly.

We instrumentalists need to move and coordinate, sense, think, feel and express - the task for the nervous system is extraordinarily complex. For the student who initially appears to lack physical ‘talent’ the learning process requires an equally complex developmental approach from a teacher.

So how can we help our pupils if they strain and struggle? How can we avoid the temptation to “write off” a student who makes little progress. How can we stimulate potential and turn frustration into optimistic engagement? My own experience of frustration has given me a strongly sympathetic motivation to help every student navigate the trial and error process that is human learning in the search for effortless ease....or innate ‘talent’.

Here are a few examples of the many ways in which the Feldenkrais Method has informed and enriched my approach to helping students of all aptitudes overcome challenges.

Establish equilibrium throughout the body.

Balance, meaning an equilibrium which is mobile and responsive, is central to the Feldenkrais Method. Equilibrium was the key that originally unlocked my playing. A dynamic balance on our sit bones (in other words the pelvis) gives the spine a stable yet responsive foundation. In turn, a poised alignment of the spine allows the shoulder girdle to sit comfortably and to move freely over the chest, liberating the arms. It can be a revelation to discover the true length and extraordinary mobility of our arms when we realise that they actually extend to our collar bones and free-floating shoulder blades. Exploring and establishing a mobile balance, whether sitting or standing, can provide the conditions for releasing habitual tension patterns so that our muscles are free to respond to our intentions, and self expression can flow.

Shine the spotlight of conscious awareness

While my students are playing I express comments as questions: “Is your bow straight?” “How is your tuning?” “What is your thumb doing?” This approach directs their own awareness to something they can improve. It also hands them the responsibility for making the improvement.

If an unwelcome habit is intractable I ask the student to exaggerate the habit deliberately. A Feldenkrais principle is: "if you know what you are doing you can do what you want." If the unwanted habit has not yet come into conscious awareness no amount of nagging will make any difference. Once a habit becomes conscious we open up possibilities. Through guided exploration of viable and preferable alternatives we can learn by trial and error, discriminating with increasing sensitivity differences between more or less efficient options.

Awaken curiosity and engagement

Our brains come alive when occupied with unfamiliar and intriguing stimulation. Games and tricks help students to have fun developing their bow holds, awakening their sensory experience of bones, joints, and the myriad of coordination possibilities from fingertips to shoulder blades. Over time a stiff 'claw' may be transformed into a flexible and responsive 'paw' through the gradual process of building new, or strengthening underused, neural pathways.

Build skills gradually from small and manageable component parts

For many beginners, coordinating the left hand with the bow can be a big challenge. I use a 'hands separately' approach until that coordination is working comfortably. When facing each new hurdle, break it down into smaller elements, establish each in turn, then combine the elements at a manageable rate. If we want to promote effortless ease then the learning process needs to be finely tailored to the student's capacity and rate of learning.

Exploit the power of imagination and visualisation

It has helped my playing to pretend I have square podgy hands in contrast to my own long narrow hands, such that transforming my image of my hands had the effect of transforming the way my hands functioned, for the better. I might ask my students to imagine themselves playing a challenging passage with effortless ease, offering adjectives, metaphors and visualisations to inspire the imagination. We can become more 'talented' by imagining how 'talented' might feel. Indeed, the pleasurable sensation of effortless ease can be used as a yardstick to measure whether a challenge or skill has fully matured.

"What is this thing called Feldenkrais?"

The Feldenkrais Method is a somatic education system related to what is nowadays called brain plasticity. The method assumes that we all have enormous potential for learning and improvement throughout our life, and this potential is accessed by increasing and refining our **awareness** of our movements, sensations, feelings and thoughts.

My teacher at the RCM, Joan Dickson, a founder of ESTA UK, believed that her job was to prepare her pupil to be his/her own best teacher. Similarly, Moshe Feldenkrais promoted the "art of learning", or learning how to learn. His extraordinary life spanned the 20th century and both world wars. He was a doctor of physics, an engineer and a judo black belt. He was a polymath, widely informed in philosophy and psychology as well as his own disciplines. His method grew out of a need to repair his own serious knee injury. It is a fascinating synthesis of his understanding of forces, anatomy and physiology, the behaviour of the skeleton as it moves through space in relation to gravity, and human developmental processes. Eventually Dr Feldenkrais created a vast collection of lessons called "Awareness Through Movement" which can be taught verbally to groups and also one-to-one via touch and words.

This introduction to the Feldenkrais Method concerns its relevance to string players and teachers. In fact the Feldenkrais Method can benefit anyone (whatever their walk of life or state of health) who is interested in improving their movement, their everyday functioning, and their potential to learn and develop.

