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Wits School of Arts

Drama for Life

Research Report WSOA 7082A

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TOPIC:

Outside in: Practice as research - Exploring the use of somatic approaches to address self-regulation for Wits University Master of Drama Therapy students for learning online

Supervisor: Linda (Mdena) Thibedi & Prof Hazel Barnes

Research Paper submitted to University of the Witwatersrand in partial fulfilment of requirements of Master of Arts by Coursework and Research Report in the field of Drama Therapy

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Elayne Sinclair- 1601516 14/03/2022

…… ……..

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Chapter 1
Contextualising the Research

This research is titled "Practice as research - Exploring the use of somatic approaches to address self-regulation for Wits University Master of Drama Therapy students for learning online". I myself am a Master of Arts student specializing in Drama Therapy. I, unlike those students who have gone before me, have had to engage with my Drama Therapy training online. My colleagues and I were the first group of South African Drama Therapy students at Drama for Life to engage in this way of learning. As a student, I believe this process has shifted the way the training is taught, but at the same time I, as a researcher, believe there are valuable lessons to be learnt and shared from a student's perspective.

I am of the belief that it is vital to understand oneself and one's positionality, which informs the passions and directions of research. It is important to acknowledge my positionality as a Christian, white female, who has had the opportunity to be educated on mental health and somatic approaches in my tertiary education. It is also important to take into account my past experiences as a dancer in classical ballet, contemporary dance, and Afrofusion. The positionality I hold has played a role in shaping my assumptions. I have outlined these below, including the impact they have for how I view the world. 1. Firstly, I believe your external environment has an impact on your internal environment and vice versa through the Body-Mind connection (Chan, Ying Ho & Chow, 2002). Being surrounded by external factors that can be viewed as chaotic or busy will result in chaotic or busy thinking. 2. I believe, because of Westernization, there has been a negative impact on body awareness and looking after one's physical health. I say this because everything has become so accessible and within our immediate reach sometimes limiting or negating the body and what it is capable of doing. Previously people used to go and fetch water from the river, taking time to walk and engage their entire bodies. There are groups within societies where this is still their everyday experience, but for those living in more globalised and suburban areas, the water now comes out directly from the taps into our homes. As a middle-class individual, I have noticed an increase in accessibility in certain parts of society for certain groups of people. Resources, entertainment, and connection with others is within immediate reach. This increase in accessibility has brought with it stagnation, where on some days while learning online the only movement I have done is walking

from my desk to the kitchen and back. 3. I am of the belief that not all humans adjust well to change, especially when it means letting go of negative habits for more optimal habits that take more work. This has to do with the idea that habits are mental constructs (Verplanken, 2006). It takes a lot of effort to break habits as they need repetition, awareness, control, and mental efficacy (Verplanken, 2006: 639). The decision to avoid the more effortful habit that holds more benefits comes from a place of taking the path of least resistance. 4. I believe we live in a universal system that was built on power and oppression. The root of the word oppression is press. When something is pressed, it is caught amongst forces that restrain or prevent its motion or mobility (Frye, 1983: 1). The intention behind this prevention of mobility is created to benefit socially, politically, and monetarily those behind the pressing forces. It is almost impossible to imagine a system outside of this reality. Instead of trying to destroy the entire system - which might take many life cycles, we must try to find out how to understand it, so that we're able to break as many structures as possible from inside the system of oppression. This means finding as many moments as possible to re-instigate agency for mobility. 5. I believe there is value in people imagining and playing and being artistic. This playing, as used in Drama Therapy, holds healing potential for the individual (Schafer, 2003). The healing potential stems from play being used as a vehicle that "fosters numerous adaptive behaviours including creativity, role rehearsal, and mind/body integration" (Schafer, 2003: 2). As a training Drama Therapist, I have seen the positive impact the creative arts have had for improving psychological well-being on clients I worked as a Drama Therapy intern. And in my own life I have experienced how being creative and having a playful disposition allows for certain moments to release stress and self-regulate my emotions. I have always had a fascination around one's physicality and how this informs one's identity. From a young age this meant being aware of how I walked down school corridors and what that communicated to others about my identity. In my university years it led to questions around what it means to move through life optimally and the potential of body awareness for working through potentially harmful habitual patterns. I was made aware of this through traditional training for the actor, where the actor needs to look after their body so they can optimally use it in performance (Boal, 2002). Actors also need to be very aware of how changing body stance and movements can convey different characters and different emotional states.

I am of the belief that the way our bodies perform our identity to others in our life has now shifted as a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic. At the end of 2019 it was discovered that a deadly

virus has been identified in a few people. The COVID-19 spread from person to person and soon country to country (Yuki, Fujiogi, & Koutsogiannaki, 2020). The first case of COVID-19 was found in South Africa on the 5th of March 2020 (Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020). The rapid increase in positive cases caused the South African Government to implement a six-week hard lockdown. Two years later the lockdown has been lifted, with minimal positive COVID-19 cases. As a result of all that has taken place since March 2020, I am of the belief that our lives have changed. We now wear masks in public spaces, practice social distancing and some of us even learn online. In our current reality, especially with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. 6. I believe the isolation and shift to virtual reality (staring at screens, hunched over desks) has been a contributing factor to the decline in mental health. An abstract from a research paper carried out by Levy and Duke (2003) speaks to the relationship among emotional states of anxiety and depression, certain personality characteristics and specific movement variables. I have personally been affected by the shift to online learning through strain and tension physically felt in my body, as well as an increased sense of anxiety and stress. I believe this was a result of not being able to feel a separation between university life and my personal life. My schoolwork permeated into my bedroom; a place meant for rest. School work became attached to my phone, a device I constantly carry around, like most people my age. There were no explicit moments to disconnect from schoolwork, with its continuous deadlines and homework. This left me mentally stressed, with the stress permeating into the physical. However, as a student studying Drama Therapy, I believe there were some unconscious advantages and therapeutic benefits within my course work.

Having been introduced to ways of working with the body from my training as an actor as well as therapeutic interventions through my Drama Therapy training, I began experimenting for myself optimal ways of navigating the online space using the somatic approaches I had learnt about in my studies. This was done through performance-based creative research I carried out earlier in 2021. For this creative research, I created a video that incorporated a sequence of movements that made up a ritual I had created for myself. This ritual became a way for me to prepare and de-role from the online space. Included within this creative research was journal reflections and body-map images I painted representing the benefits of this mindful approach as well as its ability to be used as a form of emotional regulation. At the beginning of COVID-19 and online learning, it was quite tough to find ways of embodying what we were learning in our course for deeper understanding. Drama Therapy has the goal of allowing individuals to reconnect with their minds and bodies to

gain new perspectives and understandings (Snyder, 2019). Therefore, it felt extremely disjointed having to learn Drama Therapy with all its creative and embodied components, while being physically distanced and separated by a screen. Overtime I noticed the physical distance became an internal distance. There was a distance between my mind and my body, which impacted my mental health. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2004: 1), the definition given for mental health is: "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community". Working online and sitting still for hours led to physical pain in my shoulders, neck and back, impacting my physical well-being. By not allowing my body to move and stretch while my mind was extremely active through work being done online, the disconnect led to feelings of disjointedness, resulting in a lack of regulation for myself and what I was processing internally. This speaks to the aspect of mental health where the ability to cope with stress was impaired, therefore influencing my ability to productively get through class work.

In my previously mentioned creative research work done in 2021, I focused on the connection between therapeutic somatic approaches like that of Laban movement analysis (Laban & Ullmann, 1971; Levy & Duke, 2003; Loman & Brandt, 1992; Thornton, 1996; Tsachor & Shafir, 2017), Bartenieff Fundamentals (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980; Bartenieff, 1955; Hackney, 2003; Woodruff, 1992), and embodiment (Jennings & Holmwood, 2016; Jones, 1994; Koch & Fischman, 2011; Munro, 2018; Milioni, 2007) within Drama Therapy. This creative research has largely influenced this current research, questioning if my own past experiences can be branched out and impact the experience of others. As a result of this, the question this Research Paper aimed to ask was: Is there an opportunity for these ways of working with the body to be used by South African University students who are learning online to help them with emotional regulation? And to what extent can Drama Therapy be a container within which these somatic approaches are implemented? Maté (2008) speaks of the part of the brain linked to self-regulation as being finely tuned to the environment. He maintains that being in an environment that promotes incongruence between the activeness of the mind and inactiveness of the body, can impair the ability to self-regulate. For me, the online learning space was one of incongruence, impacting my ability to emotionally regulate myself in healthy ways. Through my creative research, in an attempt to look for possibilities to support my own mental health while working online, I used somatic approaches like Laban movement analysis (Laban & Ullmann, 1971; Levy & Duke, 2003; Loman & Brandt, 1992;

Thornton, 1996; Tsachor & Shafir, 2017), Bartenieff Fundamentals (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980; Bartenieff, 1955; Hackney, 2003; Woodruff, 1992), and various forms of embodiment (Jennings & Holmwood, 2016; Jones, 1994; Koch & Fischman, 2011; Munro, 2018; Milioni, 2007) to create a stretching ritual as a way to prepare my mind and my body to enter the online space, as well as a way to de-role (Landy, 2009) after engaging online. Along with preparation and de-rolling, I found the ritual helpful with regulating my emotions, where stress and anxiety were decreased. Experiencing the effectiveness of these approaches in my own life left me questioning how other university students were experiencing online learning. Was their experience similar to mine? If so, was there a way to share how I had navigated this experience, with others?

1.1. Problem Statement

There is research to support that over time, the mental health of university students globally has been declining (Storrie, Ahern & Tuckett, 2010). However, there is a lack of research around the specific experiences of South African University students. This Research Paper adds knowledge to the current knowledge gap that takes into account the landscape of the South African University experience in correlation with the recent onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift to online learning and the implications this holds for physical and mental dis-ease. This Research Paper hypothesized that South African Masters University students feel overwhelmed with online learning and the unique challenges that come with learning during a pandemic, creating difficulties in looking after their mental health. This is in addition to the baseline stresses that come with being a university student and the difficulties that some South African students face around education, poverty, and inequality (Bantjes et al, 2020). Acknowledging the potential privilege that I hold as a white female as well as a training Drama Therapist who has direct access to therapeutic knowledge, I have still experienced difficulty in making time to work through the impact of online learning. This lack of information around the experience of South African University students is even more significant when trying to find information about the presence of somatic approaches within the university space. The lack of information around what other university students are experiencing in relation to the shift to full online learning is also due to the COVID-19 pandemic having taken place quite recently. In my opinion, this makes this specific research contextually relevant.

With the introduction of online learning, I believe students are mentally overstimulated. This is a result of not being able to step away from the actual screen that lessons are taking place on. As well as the constant reminder of tasks, lessons, homework, and deadlines. My personal experience of this overstimulation has resulted in feelings of disconnect between my mind and body as well as an increase in feelings of stress, anxiety, and frustration. I had realised the increase in time spent online had started to impact me through various adverse reactions. There is supporting evidence that suggests "chronic sensory stimulation via excessive exposure to screen time" may increase the risk of cognitive, behavioural, and emotional disorders experienced by adolescents and young adults (Neophytou, Manwell, & Eikelboom, 2021:724). It was only once I had made the time to allow myself to de-role from the experience of being online that I became aware of the stressors I was holding in my body. It was only by stepping away from my devices and mindfully acknowledging what I was experiencing, giving myself space to get back in touch with my body through different exercises that I felt I was able to regulate my emotions better, with a decrease in stress and anxiety. I was only able to really grasp this experience, because I carried out my creative research, with the incorporation of my ritual created with somatic approaches, for a substantial period of time.

I believe that in the 21st century, technology plays a role that has the potential to cross certain boundaries. Hu, Santuzzi, and Barber (2019) carried out a study looking at the impact of telepressure, or the intense urge to quickly respond to communication within the work space, held for employees. There were observable connections taking place between workplace telepressure and health outcomes. This included physical health outcomes like burnout and lack of sleep, impaired psychological health and reduced work productivity (Hu, Santuzzi, & Barber, 2019: para 4). I would like to compare the constant pressure that was present to answer work telecommunication with the constant pressure of communication during online learning, like having to reply to lectures emails, or engage with class Whatsapp group chats. Communication does have its place in creating helpful reminders for students and making sure everyone is aware of what is happening, but I had observed a breach in boundaries, where communication occurred outside of class time and on weekends. There was the assumption that responses were expected, even if it was outside class time or consultation times. It should be noted that these breaches in communication were carried out by both lecturers and students. In my personal life I have experienced how there is the expectation that I need to always be available to message people back

or answer calls, regardless of the time of day. The COVID-19 pandemic has made me aware of the need for boundaries to be put in place, even in the learning space. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, where University work used to be held within the physical space of campus, it has permeated into homes and personal spaces. The mental overstimulation and constant pressure of being reminded of the online space causes the focus to be on the mind, thereby creating a loss of focus on what the body is experiencing, producing a disconnect. To address this, I believe the extreme disconnect from learning online might be more effectively worked through using a more somatic mental health support model. This type of model can support both the body and the mind. Therefore, this Research Papaer attempted to understand the capacity Drama Therapy might have as a container of somatic approaches that hold a more specific integrated intervention perspective, which can be used to bridge this disconnect. When students feel too overwhelmed to deal with the mind (a resource that might be overwhelmed with studies), a way to tap into healing for themselves is through the body (Chan et al, 2002).

In creating approaches that are cognisant of cultural contexts and influences, Fernando (2008) suggests that mental health care workers should be trained in understanding cultural variation in mental health (as cited in Tema & Sodi, 2014: 198). Despite the significance outlined in incorporating cultural competence within the training of mental health professions, there has been little done in South Africa, especially in the fields of psychology and psychiatry to carry out this incorporation (Anderson et al, 2003; Fernando 2008 as cited in Tema & Sodi, 2014: 198) believes that within major mental health professions there is a lack of inclusion around the cultural experience for individuals who seek mental health aid because they are “content with the status quo” (Tema & Sodi, 2014: 198). It is important to bring contextual understanding of a persons’ history and culture into a mental health intervention. A part of this contextual understanding specific to this Research Paper is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experience of online learning. The data within this research generates more information and awareness around the state of South African University Masters students’ mental health, specifically around levels of stress, tension, and anxiety. Providing possible new interventions that include more work with the body and less traditionally Western forms of intervention in providing mental health support, could hold significance in alleviating the harm experienced by online learning, which can be seen as a shift towards more Western forms of working (which is more individualized, isolated, and compartmentalized).

1.2. Research Aims

This research aimed to understand how University Masters students' mental health had been affected by online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the corresponding mental dis-ease or de-regulation they could explicitly and implicitly be experiencing in their bodies (through the body-mind connection), and how Drama Therapy can be used as a tool to work with the body in order to address the effects and create healing opportunities. This was carried out using a questionnaire within a participant group. The reason for using Drama Therapy in this study is the ability it holds as an embodied practice and as a form of therapy that seeks to achieve therapeutic goals. This links to the focus of this research with its use of particular somatic approaches for the well-being of university students and an improvement in their experience of online learning spaces. Drama Therapy is also incorporated within this Research Paper because all the participants within the participant group were Drama Therapy Masters students.

Another aim of the research was to look at the efficacy of somatic approaches like Laban movement analysis (Laban & Ullmann, 1971; Levy & Duke, 2003; Loman & Brandt, 1992; Thornton, 1996; Tsachor & Shafir, 2017), Bartenieff Fundamentals (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980; Bartenieff, 1955; Hackney, 2003; Woodruff, 1992) and embodiment (Jennings & Holmwood, 2016; Jones, 1994; Koch & Fischman, 2011; Munro, 2018; Milioni, 2007), to create accessible mental health support for South African University Masters students as they navigate the online space. These specific approaches were chosen for this Research Paper because it was the approaches used in the previous creative research intervention the researcher carried out on herself. For computer-mediated communication, like class content being presented online, Paulo (1999) found that for adult students, even if online work held a smaller amount of content, students would experience 'stimulus' overload, and not necessarily 'content' overload. This study by Paulo (1999) was carried out during a time where technology was not as advanced as it is today. It could be hypothesized that as time has progressed and technology with it, the stimulus overload experienced during that time would be greater in today's society.

There is a need to find effective ways of providing coping skills and assistance for university students where an already difficult experience (university and tertiary education) has been made even more challenging due to the current pandemic and the challenges online learning brings. The

research aimed to use an outside-in approach, where working with the body allows relief for the mind, which is being overstimulated in the online learning space. The research encourages and advocates for the use of somatic approaches as a way to provide university students with knowledge that equips them to prepare for engagement with online spaces. This preparation encompasses a greater awareness of the relationship between the body and the mind, and how working with the body holds regulatory benefits for online learners physically and mentally (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Lastly, the research aimed to understand the university students' experience of online learning and the online space through questionnaires as well as incorporating the researcher's own experience of using somatic approaches as a form of mental and physical aid. Linking the researcher's previous experience of practically applying the somatic approaches with the results of what other university students are doing for themselves, resulted in this research providing potential recommendations on what gaps need to be addressed by University Counselling Departments, in order for students to be optimally supported as they go through the online learning experience.

1.3. Research Questions

There were four questions that this research looked to answer.

1. What are (if any) the negative physical or mental implications of online learning for Wits University Master of Drama Therapy students?
2. To what extent are Wits University Master of Drama Therapy students aware of the implications of the lack of embodiment of their online learning experience and its impact on their mental health?
3. What role can movement and performative physical work have, in providing psychological support for the process of online learning?
4. To what extent can movement and performative physical work within a Drama Therapy framework be a viable option for mental health support that can be implemented within a South African University structure?

1.4. Methodology

The method I chose for this research is practice-led research. For Candy (2006), practice-led research looks at how practice can lead to research insights. This method holds that the creative practitioner or researcher holds training and specialized knowledge that can lead to specialized insights which can be generalized and written up as research (Smith, 2009: 5). I had previously carried out a separate performance-based research project. The ritual that emerged through this separate research project held therapeutic benefits for me as it allowed me to self-regulate my emotions, as documented in journal entries I recorded and creative art in the form of body maps that recorded the positive shift that occurred in my physical and mental state. This held implications for myself as a training Drama Therapist who needs to be aware of my own internal state and how I can be conscious and mindful of my body, as that falls into the scope of what I will be using with clients. It also holds implications for how unconscious I was originally around the impact working online had on my mental state. Having done this work on myself, it will be accompanied with research that investigated the experience of other Wits University Masters of Drama Therapy students working online, and advocates for the introduction of more mindful avenues of working with somatic approaches as a way to prepare to work online as well as de-role afterwards. The de-rolling process speaks to a shift from one state of being to another (Landy, 2009: 76). When working online, there is a certain type of engagement with the work which can become very detached. In my own studies this was a result of working on a platform within a screen, made up of coding and pixels. Even when lecturers attempted to create moments online where we could interact (like on a digital white board or chat forums), there was still the understanding that the sense of connection could be ended with a click of a button. The lack of tangible work and the distance felt between my classmates created emotional detachment, along with the physical and mental detachment of the body and mind. During the time I was experimenting with my creative research and exploring ways somatic approaches could aid my experience, I found that not only was it possible to de-role from these emotions of detachment, but that it was very necessary. The de-rolling process speaks to a shift from one state of being to another (Landy, 2009: 76). For me the shift was moving from a place of detachment, to a place of releasing those emotions of detachment and becoming aware of myself again.

As practice-led research is seen as still developing in its methodologies (Candy, 2006), I would like to create a working definition that fits in with this research. According to Candy (2006: 3) practice-led research "is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice". It employs professional and creative methodologies and evaluative criteria (Sullivan, 2009: 67). My understanding of practice-led research is research that aims to create new practical knowledge within a practice using evaluative criteria of an ethnographic situation. This research involves looking at the experience of Wits University Master of Drama Therapy students who work in online spaces, and how their mental state (linked through the body-mind connection) has been impacted. This holds implications for the effectiveness of somatic approaches to be used and made accessible as a form of intervention that provides aid for the hypothesized negative physical and mental impacts of online learning. In this way, the research method is practice-led as it hopes to lead to new knowledge that has operational significance for the practice. Previous creative research has been carried out, which was used to inform this current research along with data obtained through questionnaires used to examine the hypothesized experience of online learning for university students. Practice-led research may have results that are fully described in text without a creative outcome (Candy, 2006: 3), which is the aim of this present research.

A longstanding tradition that feeds into practice-led research is experimental or ethnographic research which is based on observation in the world (Sullivan, 2009: 154). This links with this research in its aim to look at the experience of the specified group of students and how they experienced their engagement with the online space. Practice-led research is known to hold two different research outcomes; discursive (analytical) and non-discursive (creative) writing (Sullivan, 2009: 129). Because this research looks at collecting information around student's experiences, the research is qualitative and will use a discursive outcome to analyse the qualitative data collected and discuss the possible implications for optimizing student's experience with the online space.

My data sources are made up of my own journaling and documentation of the somatic approaches I used as an intervention for my own online learning experience which was carried out for previous creative research (Appendix A & B) and is combined with the experiences and thoughts of the other students from the group researched, which is the data that was collected in this current

research. This provides context around the landscape that university students navigate and was carried out using questionnaires. Questionnaires allowed me to reach more people as they are easier to disperse and carry out than individual in-person interviews, since it is easier to email questionnaires to participants. I believe online questionnaires were also safer in terms of lessening in-person contact during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the limited period of time within which I could carry out this research, my pool of participants ended up being much smaller than originally intended. The original intention was to gather data from Master's students in multiple universities in South Africa, however the final group of participants were made up of Master's students from the University of the Witwatersrand, studying Drama Therapy. This participant group was chosen because they had experienced full time classes within the online space since the start of 2020 and I knew I was able to reach out to them within the limited time I had to carry out this research. The advantage of working with this participant group is that due to the course they are studying, they are more in touch with their emotions than other students might be which allows responses that are more in depth. The disadvantage is that it is a smaller group of participants within a single department, so the data cannot be assumed to be representative of the larger student body within the University of the Witwatersrand.

The questions within the questionnaire fall into five categories. The first category is time related. How much time is spent online doing what? The next category looked at the physical experience of the student while working online. Does the participant experience physical discomfort while working online? If so, are they aware of what triggers it, if the pain impacts them psychophysically, and what they do to try to alleviate the discomfort (if at all). The third category speaks to the psychophysical experience of the student while working online. Does the participant notice a difference in their stress levels before or after working online? If the participant notices feelings of anxiousness or stress or frustration, do they find ways to alleviate this? The fourth category asked if the participant has ways of preparing themselves for entering or leaving online learning. Do they take time to create distance for themselves from online learning and class work? The fifth and final category looked at how the specific university prepared its students for the transition to online learning (if at all).

This data was examined in order to understand the experience these Masters University students are going through in terms of how the online space impacts them and was combined with my

previously carried out performance-based research which shows the impact working with somatic approaches holds as a way to work with the body to aid the mind, resulting in self-regulation through preparation and de-rolling from the online space.

1.5. Ethics

Because the research involved working with human participants, consent was needed from participants. This was gained through participant information sheets and consent forms that explained information about the research topic, as well as informing participants that any information shared in the questionnaire will be confidential. This was done using pseudonyms and not sharing information that could be directly linked to that person in their real life. This means the risk of anonymity is low, however it cannot be fully guaranteed because they are speaking to their personal experience within a smaller faculty in their university. To work with participants from the University of the Witwatersrand, permission was needed by the relevant registrar to distribute the questionnaire. Ethics permission to carry out the research was also obtained by filling out an ethics application form that was approved by the Wits Ethics Committee. The questionnaire was also distributed through email to the different participants with the choice to participate in the research or not, understanding that they could withdraw from the research at any point.

Chapter Two

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Literature Review

For this research, I believe it is valuable to understand the relationship between online learning, implemented as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and mental health. In looking at how this relationship fits into the context of South Africa, literature around the experience of South African University students will be reviewed. In discussion of the impact of online learning, there are both pros and cons. It is important also to acknowledge the role online learning has had in making learning safe and accessible during a global pandemic. However, there is an interesting debate around the repercussions that technology has on our brains and thought processes, in relation to the convenience it brings with it (Hart & Frejd, 2013). I am of the belief that these repercussions will only be fully understood and documented with time.

2.1.1. COVID-19 and the shift to online learning

Research has been done to articulate the consequences that attachment to technology holds for individuals (Scott, Valley & Simecka, 2017). It includes "lowered social skills, self-motivation, emotional intelligence, and empathy and increased conflict with others, ADHD, and depression in younger populations" (Scott et al, 2017: 604). The negative impact touches on an individual behaviourally, affectively, and cognitively. Research carried out by Scott et al (2017: 607) shows that the impact online environments have on people include "increased stress levels, and negative long-term impacts on cognitive processes", personal and family relationships, and physical health. People experience the feeling of having an ever-present connection to the work and the thought of missing out on work or assignments creates a state of anxiety. This literature is important because it is drawing awareness to the mental overstimulation people are facing and the subsequent negative consequences it holds. This is where the ability to provide relief to the overstimulation of the mind can be explored using the body.

As a university student, I am in my second year of working within this online space. Working for an extended period of time within this online space that impacts me behaviourally, affectively, and cognitively leads to questions around how the body is embodying this experience, and how it might

be manifesting itself in the body. However, despite my personally experienced negative consequences the online space might have, its usefulness in having the ability to allow students to proceed with university work through a worldwide pandemic does have a place and needs to be acknowledged (Dhawan, 2020: 8). In taking note of the positive and negative sides of online learning, I believe it is vital to understand how to navigate it effectively and safely for the long term. Especially if online learning is a tool that might be permanently implemented within university structures. There is research that supports the use of cognitive behavioural approaches as a way to help address issues relating to the negative side effects of technology, as well as systematic approaches (Scott et al, 2017). "When the client feels heard, listened to, and empathetically understood, they are more likely to engage in developing and actively implementing cognitive or behavioural strategies proposed for positive change moving forward" (Scott et al, 2017: 611). In order to provide the best possible support structures to assist university students to optimally navigate online platforms, the structures in place have to be able to accommodate and acknowledge what the individual student is experiencing. In a situation like this, I believe structures that aim to assist larger groups of students in a generalized way might be problematic. This is because support that takes into account each student's individual contextual experience and difficulty would require more time listening to the student and finding appropriate methods of assistance. Something that a structure designed for quantity and not necessarily quality would be framed towards.

2.1.2. Effects of online spaces on mental health

As a child I would often hear my parents and teachers say "too much TV will rot your brain". Now, it is normal to have TV's in bedrooms, and to have content downloaded on laptops and cell phones, items we carry close to us every day. The prevalence of technology can be seen in almost all aspects of our lives. Technology is what makes online spaces possible. Even online learning spaces. Research shows that too much technological use can impact a person affectively, cognitively, and behaviourally (Scott, Valley & Simecka, 2017). These effects manifest themselves through symptoms of excess stress, decreased emotional connection, decreased self-esteem, attention fragmentation, erosion of empathy, inability to set boundaries, increased need for immediate gratification, and numerous disorders that fall within the Diagnostic and Statistical

Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), 5th Edition (Scott et al, 2017: 605). This then invites the question, does the impact of technology meant for entertainment hold different consequences for our mental health than technology meant for education?

There is value in first understanding what mental health means before unpacking how it is affected by online spaces. Mental health can be understood as a condition of symptoms of well-being.

> *"Subjective well-being reflects individuals' perceptions and evaluations of their own lives in terms of their affective states, psychological functioning, and social functioning. Well-being researchers often use positive mental health synonymously with subjective well-being."*
>
> (Keyes & Lopez, 2002: 48)

This Research Paper believes that if a person uses negative symptoms to describe their subjective experience of their life, depending on the symptoms, this has connotations that their mental health is in a negative space. The opposite can be said if their life symptoms are positive, depicting a positive mental health space.

In a cross-sectional study carried out among Saudi Arabian medical students, it was found that during the shift to online learning, there was pandemic-related anxiety and stress (Bolatov, Seisembekov, Askarova, Baikanova, Smailova & Fabbro, 2021: 183). There was a decrease in motivation, self-efficacy, and cognitive engagement. Another study was conducted among more than 30 000 students from around 62 countries who have also shifted to online learning as a way of adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic (Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomaževič & Umek, 2020). The authors of this study concluded that the increase in negative symptoms of well-being were attributed to worries around the future of professional careers and studies, as well as boredom, anxiety, and frustration directly connected to the online platform.

In another study it was found that amongst university students working online, the moderate to high levels of anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic had significant association with "general somatic symptoms, in particular, fatigue symptoms and gastrointestinal symptoms" (Shevlin, Nolan, Owczarek, McBride, Murphy, Gibson Miller, Hartman, Levita, Mason, Martinez, & McKay, 2020, as cited in Bolatov et al, 2021: 184). However, in a study conducted amongst Kazakhstan medical university students, it was found that the shift to online learning resulted in lower levels of burnout, depression, and anxiety (Bolatov et al, 2021: 190). This was in comparison

to learners who were still being taught in person during the same period. The study did acknowledge that negative changes associated with online learning during the COVID-19 period were associated with "symptoms of depression and anxiety, and dissatisfaction with academic performance" (Bolatov et al, 2021: 191). Despite the negative impacts of online learning, the study concluded that the evidence supported online learning as an avenue that not only helped in the fight against the spread of the COVID-19, but also as having had a positive impact on the mental health of students. The results from these studies (Bolatov et al, 2020; Aristovnik et al, 2020) makes it clear that online learning held a negative impact on the mental health of the students in the majority of the case studies. However, the presence of a case study that points to an overall positive experience of the online learning space brings with it questions such as: if those results are outliers in the general experience; if and how the transition to online learning was facilitated for those students; and the technical support that might have been provided. The study that showed students experiencing a positive outcome from online learning was done in Kazakhstan, a second world country. When looking at the experiences of South African University students, it is valid to note that it is a third world country.

2.1.3. The South African University student experience

A study was carried out by Sibanda and Donelley (2014) where entry level South African university students taking the module Management Science 101 were studied as they experienced a transition from in-person learning to integrating more online learning throughout their 3 years of studies. There were no significant changes to the overall marks. However, there was a decrease in marks in the beginning of the year when the online learning was first implemented, suggesting that students could have been struggling to acclimatize to the new university structure as well as the new form of learning online. The students' marks gradually increased as the year went on. In terms of student demographic profiles, the study found that the African student group was unfavourably impacted when the learning program was first implemented, while the Indian student group had a significant increase in their pass rate. There was a very slight increase in the marks of Coloured students while White students maintained a 100% pass-rate. Jama, Mapesela, and Beylefeld's retention theory (2008) could be at play here, which asserts that "African students perform lower than other groups since they are from previously disadvantaged backgrounds" (as cited in Sibanda

& Donelley, 2014: 484). In the case of this study though, the degree of change in the results is not substantial enough to make conclusive claims. In the classification of student programmes, it was found that mainstream classes had a gradual increase in the pass rate, while part-time/evening students had a drop in their pass rates. This suggests that the more time the mainstream students had to work with the online learning, the easier it became to work with. The difference in the younger mainstream and older part-time/evening learners indicates a possible advantage for younger students who have more time to study, as part-time/evening learners are busy during daytime hours. This is not consistent with Colorado and Eberle's (2010) finding that there is a strong correlation between age and metacognitive self-regulation among adult learners (as cited in Sibanda & Donelley, 2014: 484). The conclusions from this study are that South African entry level university students are able to effectively use online learning spaces, but time is needed to adjust to the transition and technical support and continuous assistance is needed for improvement, with the absence of such seen to have a negative impact, as was the case for evening students. Extra support might also be needed for students who come from previously disadvantaged backgrounds in order to assist and bridge potential gaps.

In the light of potential educational gaps that exist in South Africa, online learning can also be a way to reach marginalized and disadvantaged students within South Africa. In a study with fourth-year students at a South African University, research was carried out with the aim of investigating the opinions on various facets of online learning amongst students who were not familiar with online learning (Queiros & de Villiers, 2016). In a culmination of feedback from the students, the factors essential in supporting online learning were identified and ranked. The first factor that students found was most important for their success was strong social presence, characterised by "timely feedback, interaction with facilitators, peer-to-peer contact, forums, and collaborative activities" (Queiros & de Villiers, 2016: 181). The second factor was technological aspects, like "access, online learning self-efficacy, and computer self-efficacy" (Queiros & de Villiers, 2016: 181). The last factor was learning tools, comprised of websites and video clips (Queiros & de Villiers, 2016: 181). The results from this study show that the sense of community (ubuntu) that is a large part of the South African culture, needs to be applied even in the online space, where if students feel alone and isolated it makes the online learning experience much harder. Technological aspects need to be considered, especially in relation to the specific group, taking note that if a group has never experienced working in the online space additional knowledge is

needed to create self-efficacy. And lastly, learning tools are only fully effective once the first two factors have been provided. This provides a useful map of what factors South African University students need fulfilled, in order to navigate online learning spaces.

If the inclusion of online learning within South African University structures is viewed from a predominantly optimistic perspective, there is the possibility of missing how the "increasing prominence of and reliance on information technologies is strongly intertwined with rising inequality and exclusion throughout the world" (Ravjee, 2007: 29). In a country like South Africa that already experiences historical inequality and exclusion, this adds another layer to the already existing contextual factors that could be keeping certain groups of people locked in a cycle of oppression. In a study carried out by Rayjee (2007) looking at the politics of e-learning within South African higher education, there were two kinds of issues that came up with regards to the digital divide created by online learning and the incorporation of e-learning. The first issue revolves around resource distribution, where for some learners, access to hardware, software, or internet connectivity is not possible. The second issue considers not just physical access to resources, but also individual social, cultural, economic and institutional factors (Ravjee, 2007: 29-30). This study suggests looking at an alternative model of change to address unequal distribution and the digital divides that e-learning brings with it. The nature of the transformation that will take place within universities as e-learning is integrated more into the curriculum will depend on whether support is actively given or undermined. For positive transformation, there must be a "focus on skills training and affirmative academic practices, or alternative projects, such as the decolonization and democratisation projects that emphasise critical thinking and transformative academic practices" (Ravjee, 2007: 36-37). For this specific research, transformative academic practices could be looked at as to how students can transform their physical form of engagement with the online academic space with an emphasis on critical thinking in relation to the connection between how the online space is impacting them physically, and the implications this has for their cognitive or psychological state.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

For my theoretical framework, I will predominantly be looking at the work done by Van der Kolk (2014) around trauma and the body. It was his theory of working through trauma from the outside

in that mainly guided my previous creative research. Following this, I will be explaining the theory behind the somatic approaches discussed within this Research Paper. Once again, it was through my previous creative research that I was able to practically engage with these approaches. In this theoretical framework I will be focusing on the theoretical aspects of these approaches. In later chapters of this Research Report I will connect the theory with practical examples drawn from my creative research. The somatic approaches that will be looked at are made up of Laban movement analysis (Laban & Ullmann, 1971), Bartenieff Fundamentals (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980) and embodiment (Jones, 1996). In the final section of this theoretical framework, I will draw on theory that explains how Drama Therapy is able to compliment these somatic approaches and the benefits of Drama Therapy. These benefits are looked at in their ability to support optimal regulation. It is valuable to understand the theory behind this as later in the Research Paper, the influence that Drama Therapy held for the participant group will be discussed.

2.2.1. Trauma and the body

"Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event" (American Psychological Association, 2013: npn). In extreme cases, if trauma was looked at in connection with COVID-19 (a terrible event) and online learning, this could potentially manifest itself through experiencing instability emotionally, like not being able to remain calm and focused enough during class, and extreme physical symptoms, like not being able to be seated for long periods of time. The impaired emotional regulation and physical discomfort would have a substantial influence on how a person would be able to conduct themselves while learning online. It is important to note that this study's focus is on the potentially harmful effects online learning can have by increasing stress and anxiety, which manifests itself in the body. But the application of the word and experience of trauma is used tentatively with an understanding that the overall experience of the online learning space by university students is subjective. The research will be focusing on the more emergent theories around trauma as a way to understand the experience of increased feelings of stress and anxiety, where there has been a shift in explaining trauma by looking at the body and explaining traumatic memory in neurobiological terms (Leys, 2010: 6).

According to Hagemann (2009: 59 as cited in Ruf, 2012: 113) movement blockages are a sign that the flow of emotions is disturbed. This is interesting to think about when taken in the context of

the COVID-19 pandemic where the movement blockage occurs while having to sit still for online classes. There is not a conscious decision to block movement, there is just the understanding that to have class online one has to be seated at a desk and remain in place so the class can take place. The freezing of the emotional energies as a result of the movement blockage can lead to developmental issues and learning difficulties (Levin & Kline, 2010 as cited in Ruf, 2012: 107). This frozenness or stuck-ness can result in trauma if coping abilities are not realized, there is no understanding of what is happening, and if behaviour is not adapted accordingly (Senekel, 2007: 51, as cited in Ruf, 2012). There is value in looking at how trauma is understood in relation to the body and the mind. The main voice I will be looking at that addresses the recent shift in understanding trauma and the body and mind is Bessel A. Van der Kolk, who writes that (2014: npn), "trauma leaves traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems". He then outlines different avenues for dealing with trauma. For my research, I will be focusing on the third avenue of a bottom-up approach. In this approach, the individual allows the body to have experiences that contradict the bodily reactions that result from trauma - or in this case, the experience of the shift to online learning. By working via the reptilian part of the brain through breath, movement and touch, structures in the emotional part of the brain that perceive what is safe or dangerous, can be altered (Van der Kolk, 2014). The reason behind the choice of focus on this bottom-up approach is that in online spaces, the disconnect between the mind and the body that is present brings with it harmful patterns or reactions that could lead to inducing extreme and ongoing discomfort in the body. The bottom-up approach allows for a bridging of the compromised mind and body relationship, as well as a much needed increase in awareness of the body, bringing with it the ability to carry therapeutic benefits (Van der Kolk, 2014). These more physical functions of the body that the bottom-up approach taps into recalibrates the Autonomic Nervous System (Van der Kolk, 2014). The decision behind tapping into the ANS through the reptilian brain (movement) as a way to address this issue in my research is because the cognitive part of the brain has been so over-stimulated with the online environment that it might be more challenging to try and provide aid through an avenue that is, in most cases, already burnt out.

2.2.2. Therapeutic Somatic approaches and techniques

I will now look at combining the literature around Laban movement analysis (Laban & Ullmann, 1971; Levy & Duke, 2003; Loman & Brandt, 1992; Thornton, 1996; Tsachor & Shafir, 2017), Bartenieff Fundamentals (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980; Bartenieff, 1955; Hackney, 2003; Woodruff, 1992), and embodiment (Jennings & Holmwood, 2016; Jones, 1994; Koch & Fischman, 2011; Munro, 2018; Milioni, 2007) as a triad to attempt to support and aid bodies as vessels that hold trauma. Tsachor and Shafir (2017:1) write that Laban movement analysis (LMA) can help guide an individual to change certain components within their daily movements to "somatically achieve a shift in affective state". Understanding this somatic shift is relevant for understanding the shift that needs to take place for a body that is holding suffering connected to the online space, and how that connection can be adjusted to be more beneficial. There are clusters of Laban movement components that have been linked to the portrayal of certain emotions. This emotional processing that occurs during the execution of the emotional movements implies that by deliberately choosing our motor behaviour, we can affect our feelings (Tsachor & Shafir, 2017:2). This understanding mapped out by Tsachor and Shafir (2017) of the physical impacting the cognitive, is vital to this research. Laban's four movement components of Body, Effort, Space, and Shape provide a framework to help describe the movement. This awareness allows avenues and a "language" that is useful in describing how best to combat harmful emotions or feelings of anxiety and stress. For example, anger is elicited by a direct, strong, sudden, and bound Effort, an upward movement in Space, and an expanding Shape flow (Tsachor & Shafir, 2017:2). To move outside of a place of anger, a direct, light, and sustained Effort can be maintained in the body, with a rising and upward Shape. The association between emotions and their corresponding motor components have mainly been used for diagnosing emotion recognition. Tsachor and Shafir (2017:2) are the first, to their knowledge, to suggest the use of techniques for using these associations for emotion regulation. I would like to build on this idea and see the implications it can theoretically hold within a Drama Therapy space as an intervention. That movement and working through the body can be significant for emotional regulation of the individual can help in understanding how the restriction and limitation of the body caused by online learning impacts learners. Such restrictions lead to the deregulation of emotions and coping skills that leads to harmful physical habitual patterns and increased stress and anxiety. I believe this then further validates the importance of providing and

creating therapeutic interventions that take the body into account when working with mental health.

Bartenieff Fundamentals (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980; Bartenieff, 1955; Hackney, 2003; Woodruff, 1992) is another embodied approach that I believe provides another framework through which physical optimization of the body can be comprehended. Bartenieff Fundamentals is "an approach to basic body training that deals with patterning connections in the body according to principles of efficient movement functioning within a context which encourages personal expressions and full psychophysical involvement" (Hackney, 2003:33). The element of Bartenieff Fundamentals I'd like to include in my research is the idea of respecting the commonalities that human beings as a species hold, and the uniqueness each person brings with them (Hackney, 2003:33). I believe this is important in the South African context as a country full of diversity. It is important to be aware that not all people have had the ability to work with their uniqueness from a place of strength. I believe movement is a way of life and has the ability to bring optimal or non- optimal ways of being, with it. The value that Bartenieff Fundamentals holds for my specific research is its goal to "facilitate a lively interplay of Inner Connectivity with Outer Expressivity to enrich life" (Hackney, 2003:36). This notion of expressivity links to the last component of embodiment.

Carswell and Macgraw (2001:1, as cited in Milioni, 2007:3) describe embodiment as "the totality of body-mind communications". This connection between the body and the mind is important for understanding how in an online environment, physical pain can have connections to internal psychological pain. And mindfully working through the physical pain can have implications for relieving internal pain. The idea of the client who is made up of equal parts of the physical and the psychological is "a blind spot for the majority of psychotherapy literature" (Carswell and Macgraw, 2001, as cited in Milioni, 2007:3). It is important to look at the connectedness of the body and the mind, especially so if it is described as a blind spot in literature (Milioni, 2007), and during a time where the isolation people are experiencing while interacting online could cause a disconnect between the body and mind, as noted in my own performance-based research experience. It is insightful to try to discover how embodiment could be used to promote wellness and connection in a person in spaces that traditionally isolate and separate.

The decision to frame these somatic approaches within a Drama Therapy container speaks to Drama Therapy's ability to use (specifically for this research) creativity, play and movement as a

central position within a therapeutic relationship (HCPC, 2003:9-10). According to Landy, Drama Therapy is influenced by psychotherapeutic approaches and understands humans to be "motivated by one or more of the following: biological instincts, universal and transpersonal symbols, a core self, a state of alienation and aloneness, reinforcements and environmental contingencies, and social interactions" (1994:38). In both definitions, Drama Therapy is placed in the psychotherapeutic realm, with a focus on the dramatic. This research is focusing on the elements of alienation and aloneness, and reinforcements and environmental contingencies, which have been brought about with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact it holds for South African University students. Drama Therapy is able to address these elements therapeutically. Esslin (1977) describes drama as a frame encompassing action. This action is used either in imitation or representation of how humans behave. There is also a level of spontaneity that accompanies the dramatic. I believe this links with the above-mentioned somatic approaches and there is value in further exploring therapeutic movement approaches in Drama Therapy because of its already present awareness of how the body influences the mind, as explained through embodiment as a core principle and process of Drama therapy (Jones, 1996).

2.2.3. Drama Therapy as a container for somatic approaches and techniques

Drama Therapy, as defined by the United Kingdom Health and Care Professions Council, is a "unique form of psychotherapy in which creativity, play, movement, voice, storytelling, dramatization, and the performing arts have a central position within the therapeutic relationship" (HCPC 2003:9-10). The first word making up Drama Therapy is 'drama' and is taken from the Greek word 'dran', which means "a thing done" (Landy, 1994: 5). This doing is understood by Landy (1994:5) as an enactment, which is a process that is inherently known within all human life. The second word in Drama Therapy is 'therapy' and refers to "the training and aims of the therapist, and the expectations of the client" (Landy, 1994: 42-43). In combining the meaning of these two words, Drama Therapy can be understood as the process of dramatic enactment facilitated by a Drama Therapist, with a therapeutic goal/ expectation in mind. Within the context of this Research Paper, Drama Therapy within the online space would fall within this understanding of a therapeutic enactment. The enactment speaks to a type of doing, which links to somatic approaches.

The word somatic refers to “an experiential study of the body” (Hartley & Hartley, 2004: 1). Somatics relies on “the inherent wisdom of the body to heal itself” (Hartley & Hartley, 2004: 1). This concept that the body inherently knows how to heal itself links to Landy’s (1994:5) understanding that enactment is an inherently known process. When somatic approaches are incorporated within a Drama Therapy frame, there are the similar themes of self-knowledge that come into play.

One of the fundamentals that is central to Laban’s thinking is that movement is the bridge between a person's inner life and the external world (Thornton, 1996: para 7). When a person's body language is understood, you are able to understand how they respond to the rhythms and patterns of stimuli. This results in an understanding of what the person does through their body movement, how they do it, to whom they do it and why they are doing it (Thornton, 1996: para 3). The value that Laban places in understanding a person’s movement (Thornton, 1996) has connections with how the body is understood within a dramatherapy context. An important element within Drama Therapy work is understanding the way an individual’s body relates to their identity (Jones, 1996: 14). If a Drama Therapist is trained in understanding body language, it stands to reason that this brings with it the benefit of understanding what a person’s physical state communicates about their internal reality. If a drama therapist is working with a client who might be having difficulties in expressing their internal thoughts, by understanding what the client is communicating through their body language, the Drama Therapist can facilitate dramatic projection. In dramatic projection, clients can project their experience outwards using enactment, which can be a physical movement, which allows inner conflicts to be externalized (Jones, 1996: 101). This is an example of how the body can be used to achieve internal aid within a Drama Therapy context. Knowledge of a somatic approach that brings with it practical understanding of the body like Laban movement analysis (Laban & Ullmann, 1971; Levy & Duke, 2003; Loman & Brandt, 1992; Thornton, 1996; Tsachor & Shafir, 2017), and Bartenieff Fundamentals (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980; Bartenieff, 1955; Hackney, 2003; Woodruff, 1992) within a Drama Therapy context allows for greater depth of embodied work, as shown within the example above.

2.3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has looked at how in most cases, universities overseas have reported increases in COVID-19 related anxieties, with a negative impact on the mental health of students. However, studies are also present that show a decrease in feelings of burnout, depression, and anxiety. Online learning is being implemented in South Africa as a way to try to bridge divides and create greater accessibility in tertiary spaces. In studies carried out in South Africa, young first year students were found to have grappled with the transition to online learning, gradually improving throughout the year as they became more accustomed to online learning. Older part-time students had a much harder time adjusting (Sibanda & Donelley, 2014). When it comes to implementing online learning in South Africa, studies show that students first need a strong social presence, followed by being taught the technological aspects of the online platform, finally followed by learning tools (Queiros & de Villiers, 2016). These findings raise interesting points around the importance of social presence for students within the South African context, in relation to success within online learning. This brings up questions around how the COVID-19 pandemic has created a decrease in social presence, with the aim of keeping us safe. How do we navigate success in online spaces, when physical social presence has been removed for the sake of safety? Do we have to choose between success and safety, or is there a middle ground available? And are the inherently known benefits of somatic approaches within Drama Therapy effective in combating the negative effects of the online learning space?

Chapter Three

Prior Practice as Research used as essential data in this Research Report

3.1. Background of Creative Research

> *"In performance, every word, gesture, and movement of an actor tells a piece of the story to the audience. Even with a natural ability and imagination for this kind of transformation, most actors need coaching, guidance, options, and tools to meet the challenges of acting with full awareness".*
> (Polatin, 2013: xii)

As mentioned in the beginning of this Research Paper, movement has played a big part in my life. My mother used to tell me I started dancing before I started walking. I have practiced ballet since the age of four, for twelve years. After ballet, I participated in competitive athletics for the rest of my High School career. In my undergraduate years at university, I did contemporary dance and movement studies as part of my Drama Degree. Within this Drama Degree we were also taught how we move as a character plays a part in communicating something about that character to the audience. I believe the awareness around how my body moved had always subconsciously been there, but it was during my time at university where I was made aware of the strong links between how habitual movement patterns show themselves, and what this means for our internal world and sense of self. The two are inextricably linked.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I engaged with my university lectures online, every day, working from home. I found that I was starting to struggle with focus during class time, as well as experience a decrease in coping and regulation skills, with an increase in emotions of frustration and irritation. I also took note of an increase in physical body pain, particularly in my neck, upper back, and lower back. While I was starting to take note of these physical and emotional side effects of working online, I was tasked with creating a short creative research project as part of my Master of Arts Drama Therapy syllabus in the first term of the year in 2021. We were asked to focus on

work around Research as Performance. The prompt was for this smaller research task to fit into our larger research project we would be undertaking later in the year. I knew I wanted to take a closer look at understanding how working online impacted my body physically, and how this then affected my mental state, if at all. I also understood that it would be this research opportunity that would allow me to start to conduct the experiment of applying somatic approaches to myself and document the influence it had on my mental and physical state, and how it influenced the way I engaged in my online classes. The result was a collection of data made up of different creative documentation. In this research, I will be referencing this data when speaking to my own personal experience. I used a top-down somatic approach, where the process "includes tracking bodily sensations to restore well-being and healthy functioning" (Polatin, 2013: xii). As a training Drama Therapist, my hope, through this research, was to create suggestions for an actual intervention that could be carried out within a South African University structure as a way to provide psychological support and advocate for the value of more creative forms of therapy. Training in somatic approaches also has the advantage of supplying students with methods which they can carry out themselves, putting them in control of their well-being. I believe this more somatic and creative approach of providing support can create opportunities for harmful habitual patterns or ways of 'performing' in the online space to be improved and optimized. However, I believe it is important for ethical reasons to first make sense of it myself, before looking at creating an intervention for others. My creative research became my personal testing experience of this idea, where I used specific techniques and approaches to unpack my own habitual patterns while online, documented my emotional and physical experience entering and exiting online workspaces (using painting, body mapping, creating images, and journaling), to establish my baseline. Once I had an awareness of this baseline, I experimented with using somatic approaches to challenge areas I found had been compromised, with the result being a culmination of recordings that demonstrated how I was able to shift to an optimal way of engaging online, that held a more positive influence for my mental state, as well as my physical state.

3.2. A personal account of the impact of COVID-19 and online learning

Around the time of May 2021, my classmates and I were called to meet in person for a workshop to help us brainstorm ideas for our creative research project. During this workshop, I created a

performance embodying how I engaged with the online space. I performed myself sitting in front of an imaginary computer for a great length of time and showed the shift between being in front of the computer, followed by shorter moments where I moved away from the imaginary computer to recuperate. In this case the type of recuperation was a lot of releasing, through quick and sudden stretches, with frustrated sighing and deep breaths. During the performance I noted how after taking quick moments to allow for this release, when I performed going back to sit in front of the imaginary computer, I felt no benefit from my short burst of walking away and doing moments that were not mindful and intentional. After this performance many of my class members shared that they were affected by my performance, and you could sense the energy in the group was very heavy. Some of my class members even went as far as to say they were "triggered" by the performance. This was the beginning of my journey in allowing me to understand that this was not just an experience I was going through on my own but was one that was shared amongst many different individuals in my class. Observing how my class members reacted pointed me in the direction my current research is taking, in questioning how other university students are experiencing online learning. My hypothesis is that their experience is similar to mine, with a negative relationship at work, which, if this is the case, holds significance for finding interventions that target not just the cerebral implications, but also the physiological implications that online learning holds for students during COVID-19.

3.3. Outlining the creative research aims and processes

The way I worked with my own body during this creative research can be described as a somatic way of working with potential trauma. The interest around this research has predominantly been enforced by the COVID-19 pandemic where a lot of our human engagement has shifted to online spaces. I hypothesized that the isolation I personally was experiencing had an impact on my body physically. This statement was informed by my own personal experiences. My creative research aimed to take my current understanding of what I was personally experiencing deeper, where I could explore the potential links between the experiences of the body and the impact it holds for optimal functioning.

I used body mapping (Meyer 2010) and journaling to observe and record what my body was experiencing directly after online engagement. This was then followed by a short session where I

worked with my body to stretch and try to work through the tension that I was aware of. I then recorded any changes that might have taken place after this mindful, de-rolling session. Also included in these sessions was a combination of my own interpretation of therapeutic somatic techniques that helped aid optimal functioning and increased awareness of the (my) body in space. After multiple sessions I was able to look back on the body maps and journal entries (see Appendices A and B) and see how the physical therapeutic work I was carrying out on myself was impacting how I engaged with the online space, the impact this had on my internal thinking, and on my body physically.

3.4. Working from the bottom-up

This research has led me to try to understand my personal reactions to the online space, and I have found myself, as mentioned above, starting to describe the experience as one that is potentially problematic. Because the physical manifestation of being online results in pain in my body, an experience that negatively impacts me, I started looking at the work of Ruth Leys (2010) which tracks the genealogy of trauma. I would like to note that the impact of online learning has not been extreme enough to be described as traumatic, however I would like to draw on some theory around trauma to better frame the negative relationship I am experiencing when it comes to working online as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. What Ruth Leys (2010) found is that the fields of trauma with connections to Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) lack cohesion and tend to contribute to controversy. The current definition of trauma by the American Psychological Association (2013) is described as an emotional response to a terrible event. A disadvantage that comes with newer definitions of trauma is the vagueness of what describes a "terrible" event. This debate around what makes an event traumatic has been occurring since the inclusion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the DSM-III (Jones & Cureton, 2014: 259). I would like to suggest the notion that for individuals who might already be struggling with contextual factors like a lack of safe housing or other necessary resources for survival, not even considering the resources needed to work on a digital platform, the shift to working online could be traumatic. Long term reactions resulting from trauma include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and physical symptoms (Johnson, Johnson, Webber & Nettle, 2020: 191). I will be focusing on the more emergent theories around trauma, where there has been a shift in explaining trauma by

looking at the body and explaining traumatic memory in neurobiological terms (Leys, 2010: 6). The main voice contributing to this emerging shift is Bessel A. Van der Kolk who argues that "trauma is preserved in the memory and with a timeless accuracy that accounts for the long-term and often delayed effects of PTSD" (Leys, 2010: 7). Van der Kolk's hypothesis around trauma is that traumatic memory is connected to implicit memory systems, "involving bodily memories of skills, habits, reflex actions, and classically conditioned responses" (Leys, 2010: 7). My personal thoughts around the physical pain in my body having an impact on my mental health ties in with what Van der Kolk describes as a bottom-up approach for working with trauma. Once again, taking note that instead of describing my experience as one of trauma, I am exploring this bottom-up approach in relation to negative experiences brought about by working from an online space. Van der Kolk (2014) posits that the individual should be mindful around utilizing the body to combat trauma, by allowing the body to have experiences that contradict the bodily reactions that result from the trauma. For myself, this meant finding ways of moving that are restorative and beneficial to my body when in online spaces where the unconscious anxiety of knowing I will be online for 2-3 hours at a time caused ways of moving that resulted in tightness and pain.

When doing formal Drama Training in my undergraduate years, the movement that was incorporated was meant to aid us as performers who needed to look after their body in order to use it optimally to take on the role of characters in performances. This is what first connected me to the notion of having a neutral base so that whatever you want to perform as an actor can be safely stacked on top of this neutral base that the performer can return to as a way of de-rolling. The main practitioners whose work we engaged with was Laban and Bartenieff. Laban movement analysis has the relevant vocabulary to characterize movement sequences that make up certain emotions. The four components are Body, Effort, Space and Shape (Tsachor and Shafir 2017:1). As an example, anger is elicited by a direct, strong, sudden, and bound Effort, an upward movement in Space, and an expanding Shape flow. To move outside of a place of anger, a direct, light, and sustained Effort can be maintained in the body, with a rising and upward Shape. If I can use Laban movement analysis to understand my baseline Body, Effort, Space and Shape qualities, I will be able have an awareness around which of the opposite relevant qualities I need to embody to challenge my habitual patterns. Bartenieff Fundamentals are a set of principles that were influenced by Laban, but with the aim of creating corrective body movement. The live interplay of Inner Connectivity with Outer Expression that Bartenieff Fundamentals facilitates to create an

enriched life (Hackney 2003:26) was a valuable addition to my research. The awareness around the internal workings that manifests itself through external bodily expression and movement is what holds value in the Bartenieff Fundamentals. My research around documenting my internal journey in relation to my physical journey was influenced by this idea of creating an enriched life where even if I stay in the same environment (the online space) I can adapt my personal experience through challenging and working with my Inner Connectivity and Outer Expression.

3.5. Drama Therapy and somatic approaches as a tool for working with the body to allow healing

Approaches that focus more specifically on the body, like Dance Movement Therapy and Drama Therapy approach therapy from an embodied, creative, and action-oriented way (Koch & Fischman, 2011). However, there is limited literature that looks at the interconnectedness between these two therapies. In the early years of Dance Movement Therapy, Levy (2005), who was a Dance Movement therapist, used this "creative, action-oriented, and embodied approach" and called it Psychodramatic Movement Therapy, which combined psychodrama, Dance Movement Therapy, and visual arts (Young & Wood, 2018:11). In my own experience, I have noticed a shift in our current cultural climate that does not support an awareness of the body, so the value of incorporating more body work and physical awareness into all fields cannot be overlooked. Shahjahan (2015) suggests that notions of what is perceived as 'productive' need to be resisted, especially as productivity is understood in terms of getting through as much work as possible in as little time as possible. In this instance, as framed by this research, I believe productivity speaks to always being present for the 6 hours that online learning and class is taking place, as well as being present to finish assignments and work once class has finished. In society as our minds are constantly kept busy, "our bodies are dragging behind trying to keep pace, we are losing our spirit, and are soon left to ponder about our spirits when we are lying in our hospital or death beds" (Shahjahan, 2015: 499). The suggestion of how to avoid this loss of spirit is to listen to our bodies and challenge the illusion of the separateness between mind-body-spirit (Shahjahan, 2015: 499).

Potter (2015) carried out research using an integrative approach to assess emotional regulation in children through Dance Movement Therapy and Drama Therapy. She too used Laban movement analysis but incorporated it into the Drama Therapy structure to capture the children's emotional

expression through movement, dramatic action, and play (Young & Wood, 2018). The earlier Dance Movement Therapists used dance to "facilitate the spontaneous expression of thoughts and feelings and dramatic structure to add clarity and organization" (Young & Wood, 2018:11). For my creative research, I used movement and somatic approaches like Laban movement analysis (Laban & Ullmann, 1971; Levy & Duke, 2003; Loman & Brandt, 1992; Thornton, 1996; Tsachor & Shafir, 2017) and Bartenieff Fundamentals (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980; Bartenieff, 1955; Hackney, 2003; Woodruff, 1992) as a way to understand how I was moving, used dramatic tools to document and embody this understanding, through externalising it in body maps (Appendix A & B) and journals, and expand on my knowledge of LMA and BF to create essentially a de-rolling ritual for myself where I mindfully worked with my body and used exercises that combated the harmful habitual patterns I had noted. Because of my previous training and knowledge of these somatic approaches, I was able to write down which exercises I used so I could go back to that exercise on another day and document if I felt like it held even more benefits than the previous time I did it. In my journal, I was able to use the language of LMA to describe the qualities of my movements after observing them through a recording I took of myself. I then looked at these qualities that created my baseline habitual movements, and wrote the opposite quality (Appendix B). I would then try to mindfully embody these more optimal qualities and experienced a significant positive shift, resulting in better concentration and retention of energy while working online. The success that this dramatic ritual held for me in terms of improving my ability to self-regulate and be better prepared emotionally and physically for the online space holds significance for further exploration of physical body-focused work in the Drama Therapy space.

3.6. Creative Research outcomes and findings

This creative research holds great implications for my larger research project and this Research Report. My larger research focuses on how Drama Therapy can utilize somatic methods and techniques to assist the body, therefore assisting the mind, on a larger scale for South African University Masters students. In my creative research, I noticed that I had to be consistent with the physical work I was doing. Especially when addressing habitual patterns, the consistency will be key. An important shift for me with this creative research was challenging my previous understanding of working from a place of isolation during online learning as being a negative

factor for the individual and their body. What I found was that the place of isolation, in my experience, brought with it a safety and privacy that is sometimes needed when working with the body. The body can be used as a site that embodies multiple stories and experiences, with some of those experiences being very suppressed due to potential trauma (Van der Kalk, 2014). This research opened the possibility that isolated spaces can be safe spaces where rest and recuperation can be found. But it takes effort and serious mindfulness to repattern how those spaces are engaged with, especially if there is experience of that space being a negative thing, as it was initially for me. As mentioned earlier, the final product of my creative research was a video that showed how I initially engaged online with my original habitual patterns, short snippets of the ritual I created that included LMA and BF work that allowed me to repattern some harmful habits, as well as provide a moment to acknowledge and engage with how my body was feeling, finally followed by how I physically engaged online having done my preparation ritual. Using the language provided by LMA, my baseline movements were originally made up of a bound and indirect effort, with a sinking and retreating shape (Appendix B). In my ritual, I would do BF movements that targeted ways of engaging specifically my right half of my body, as that was the side that was disengaged while online, because of a habit of leaning to the left. I would also be mindful of carrying out movements and stretches in my de-rolling ritual that challenged my baseline movements and move with a free and sustained effort, and an advancing and opening shape. The improvements can be noted in diagrams that show a decrease in physical pain after doing these stretches (Appendix B), as well as a decrease in feelings of stress, anxiousness, and frustration. The value lies in how I just worked with my body but noted improvements in my mental state.

3.7. Conclusions drawn from my Creative Research

My creative research holds value for this current research in that it shows how I personally grappled with working online. I personally experienced discomfort physically as a result of sitting in front of a computer for many hours and struggled to stay focused and positive. I was lucky enough to personally hold knowledge on somatic approaches, that I used to work with myself. The result was a de-rolling ritual I carried out on myself after being online, that allowed me to work through harmful physical habitual patterns, which (at first) unknowingly reconnected my mind and body. The result was an increase in my ability to self-regulate my emotions, decreasing how often

I would experience frustration, anxiety, and lack of focus while online. There were also physical improvements with a decrease in pain felt in certain areas of my body. I used this creative research as a case study, to demonstrate the value this work held. If there are other university students who are having similar experiences to me with regards to how they are experiencing working with the online space, the next step would be to look at how the beneficial work I carried out for myself can be used to help others.

Chapter Four

Present Research

In the previous chapter of this Research Report, I mapped out how I carried out a creative research experience on myself, as a way to find solutions to my own problematic experience with online learning, earlier last year. Being aware of one's own positionality and experience is important. Using a participant group and collecting information about experiences outside of my own allowed for a better contextual understanding of the phenomenon of how students are responding to online learning. Specifically, how South African Master's students are responding. I carried out this research with Masters students from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. The participant group was made up of six learners studying their Masters in the field of Drama Therapy at the University of the Witwatersrand. The participant group was multicultural and spoke different languages with classes being held in English. It is important to note that the degree (Drama Therapy) this participant group was studying may have affected their responses. For example, as part of their course as training therapists, it is important for them to be more aware of themselves and their habitual patterns or habitual responses, to prepare them for working with clients as objectively as possible. Taking time for self-care and self-reflection is also something that is encouraged within the degree they are studying. This resulted in responses from a participant group that was more in touch with their internal world than other students who are not continuously being encouraged to reflect on this kind of level within their coursework.

Because the research is looking at experiences that are subjective and informed by different frames of reference according to the individual, a qualitative method of collecting data was needed. This resulted in the use of a questionnaire that was emailed to participants once they had given consent and read the participant information sheet. Questionnaires are referred to as documents that are made up of a collection of open and closed questions, to which participants are invited to respond to (Rowley, 2014:2). The open and closed questions give more flexibility in collecting short answers along with longer answers that provide the participant with room to explain their answer. The research was carried out through an emailed questionnaire in which the participants answered questions around the length of time they spent online, how this impacted them physically and

mentally, as well as if and how their specific institution supported the shift to an online space. The questionnaire also involved asking participants how aware they were when it came to how the online space and online learning affected them, if at all. The results from the questionnaire helped in illuminating the questions that originally brought about this research journey, as well as proposing more questions specifically around the post-graduate experience within Wits University while learning online. The questionnaire has been included in the Appendix (Appendix C) so the format and type of questions that were asked can be viewed.

4.1. Findings

The findings discussed in this chapter were taken from the data collected from the questionnaires distributed to the participant group. The findings will be unpacked using a thematic analysis. A thematic analysis allows for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of themes within qualitative data (Crakre, Braun & Hayfield, 2017:297). The data will be separated into five sections, unpacking the length of time the students spent online, the physical and mental impact of online learning, steps students took to prepare themselves for online work, and the support offered within their university.

The first part of the questionnaire focused on looking at how long the participant spends working online. On average, participants reported spending around 8 hours online for class work per day, with an average of 4-6 hours spent online recreationally per day. However, it was noted that not all the hours online were used productively. One participant reflected that “I find that I work much slower and more inefficiently in the online world”. In an ideal world, most participants said they would prefer working online for 2 hour increments with breaks in between. In adding the hours spent online for work versus recreation, there was an average of around 13 hours spent online per day. That is an incredibly high number if hours spent sleeping is also factored in.

The next part of the questionnaire looked at how working online impacted the participants physically. Participants were asked what word came up for them that described the experience of working online, and wrote words like “dread”, “disengaged”, “draining”, and “static”. In all the participants, there was a noted negative physical implication from working online. The areas in the body that were most commonly identified as holding pain or tension while working online

were neck muscles, shoulder muscles, back muscles (middle and lower back), and tightness in the jaw area, along with headaches. Sainsbury and Gibson (1954) carried out a study with 32 patients from Maudsley Hospital, London, diagnosed with some form of anxiety. From their research they found that muscle activity accompanied stress. The more a person experiences tension and anxiety, the higher their muscle tension (Sainsbury & Gibson, 1954: 223). Drawing on the findings of this research (Sainsbury & Gibson, 1954) it can tentatively be said that the tension and pain felt by the participant group learning online could not only be a result of non-optimal posture while online, but also a physiological response to stress and anxiety. On average, participants became aware of their physical pain or tension after 2 hours of working online. There is the assumption that this form of working online is characterised by being seated in front of a device. All participants said that they found ways to alleviate the pain, but this was a temporary solution, with the physical pain returning shortly after alleviating it. The alleviation of pain predominantly took the form of stretching while seated at their desk and stepping away to stretch. In the words of one of the participants, "I find that doing exercise is really important for me in protecting my body for sitting in front of a computer all day". The third part of the questionnaire focused on the relationship between working online and the participant's emotional state. The words used to describe their emotional state after being online were "foggy", "drained", "uninspired", with one participant commenting "uncompromised". These words speak to a majority of the participants having a negative emotionally impacted state after being online, with the minority experiencing no significant emotional change. When asked if working online impacted their stress levels, all but one of the participants in the study ticked "yes". For further research, it would be interesting to attempt to interview these research participants and see if there are significant differences between those who experience a negative relationship with their emotional state, versus those who did not experience any negative influences on their emotional state.

The impact of working online caused feelings of "hypo arousal" and "lethargy". The fourth section of the questionnaire focused on looking to see if participants made time for self-care or had any ways of preparing themselves for the online space. Participants were asked if they took time to de-stress and all answered that they did take the time, with all participants listing activities that can be described as active and taking place outdoors in nature. Some examples of activities were running, going for walks outside, and making the time to reconnect with friends and family. None

of the participants had a ritual or activity that they did to prepare themselves for engaging in the online space.

The fifth and last section of the questionnaire focused on how the university assisted the participants in the transition to online learning, and how the shift to online learning impacted their university experience. All participants noted difficulties in the shift, with support being given on a departmental level, but not on a wider university level. This support was noted in the form of technical support as well as emotional support. The course all the participants were a part of was a very practical course, where embodied techniques were taught and facilitated. The course was a Masters in research and course work in the field of Drama Therapy. All participants experienced a negative impact in their university experience, directly related to the shift to online learning with the feeling of not being able to adequately experience the course-work. This was noted when participants shared the cons of online learning, in which they explained how they felt that they could not embody the knowledge that was being shared with them as it was only being experienced through the online platform in a distanced way, especially in a course like theirs which requires the growth of practical skills like listening and reading a client's body language as a therapist. In the words of one of the participants: "overall it has been a difficult transition that made learning frustrating and I am not sure if it will ever stop being frustrating because we are human beings and learn faster from being in direct contact with each other".

Although participants described support being provided to them through more of a department level, I believe there was additional support that aided their experience. The participant group were all Masters in Drama Therapy students. Therefore, within their coursework they would be directly engaging with the core processes and principles of Drama Therapy (Jones, 1996). One of these is the principle of 'interactive audience and witnessing'. According to Jones (1996:112) the audience within a Drama Therapy space "can play an important part in the processes of dramatic projection, the dynamics of the group and in creation of perspective and support". In section 2.1.3. of this Research Paper, research carried out by Sibanda and Donelley (2014) explained that having a sense of community as one of the biggest factors in online learning success. It is possible that in preparing this Masters group to become Drama Therapists, they were encouraged to witness and be an interactive audience for their fellow classmates. This would have occurred during online student presentations and even during online class discussions. The result is a community of class members

that support the creation of perspective and support. Another process that would have taken place within the online classes of the participant group as Masters students in Drama Therapy is the 'therapeutic performance process' (Jones, 1996:103). This process entails the identification of a problem that needs to be expressed, "followed by an arrival of that issue which uses drama in some way" (Jones, 1996:103). During the course of their year, these Masters students had guest lecturers teach some of their lessons. Because of their degree, there lecturers would often be Drama or Arts Therapists and carry out an embodied workshop, providing practical sessions for the Drama Therapists in-training. This was still done online and carried with it the slightly distanced experience of online learning, however these sessions would allow the students to engage in this therapeutic performance process. This would allow for an increase in awareness of certain feelings and emotions, and use drama to process, express and then release the emotions. This is facilitating a healthy form of regulation to take place. Although most of the participant group reported a negative experience connected to online learning, I believe there were unconscious benefits influencing their experience as a result of the therapeutic benefits connected to their course work. The participant group was only made up of learners studying Drama Therapy, but it would be interesting to gauge the significance their course work had on alleviating some stress, compared to other learners studying course work that does not incorporate therapeutic work.

Looking at the data from the questionnaires from the research I conducted with South African university Masters students, the common experience was one of lethargy. I would like to note that within the questionnaire it did not specify whether the online learning moment was more traditional with the student sitting still in front of a screen, or whether it was during a moment that was more embodied. In my personal experience of the more traditional form of online learning, I was very aware of the emotion of frustration and what felt like a building up of emotions that I could not control, whereas within the research participants there was a collective experience of being disconnected from the work, being disconnected from their peers they were working online with, and an overall lack of motivation to effectively engage with their work. When explaining how online learning emotionally impacted them, none of the research participants wrote down emotions relating to anger, frustration, or irritation. A potential reason for why this could be, that through my previous training working with what optimal habitual patterns look and feel like, the times where I am not optimally engaging with my body could result in feelings of irritation because I am aware that there is a harmful influence taking place by spending time working online. From

my own experience and exploration, I have become aware of how online learning impacts me and how to apply somatic approaches to lessen that impact. Drawing on the findings from the participant group of this study, there appears to be similarities with my own experience around the impact of online learning. In connecting these experiences, I believe there is value in starting to look at a possible intervention for South African university students that incorporates the use of somatic approaches. This type of intervention would be specifically suited to support optimal regulation and coping while engaging with the online space. This idea will be mapped out in further detail in chapter six of this Research Paper.

4.2. Implications of the findings

According to the participant feedback, it can be said that participants feel that they are currently spending too much time online. This can be attributed to online class hours and participants potentially not being able to get through their work in an effective and productive manner. In a study carried out amongst workers in the UK, it was found that longer working hours had little to no effect on the health and mental state of male workers. In this same study, the results showed a significant negative impact on female workers (Kodz, Davis, Lain, Strebler, Rick, Bates, Cummings, Meager, Anxo, Gineste, & Trinczek, 2003: 236-237). The study (Kodz et al, 2003) does take note of extra societal pressures placed on female workers that could also play a role in added pressure on health and mental health. It is important to note that the majority of the participants in this study (Kodz et al, 2003) were female, with added societal pressures not being accounted for in the examination of the relationship between how the participant is impacted by the online space. Looking at the South African context, and the persistence of patriarchal structures that remain prevalent even in contemporary times (Albertyn, 2009), the role this plays in the lives of female university students, who also now need to navigate online spaces, should be considered. Keeping this in mind, the participant group that this research used was made up of a majority of females. Questions within the questionnaire were not created to examine external societal pressures that could be contributing to a negative experience while working online, as that was outside the scope of the aims for the questionnaire, but might have been valuable in adding another level of understanding the contextual experience of that participant group.

Looking at the feedback from participants, the hypothesis of this research is supported. There is a negative relationship at work between the participants and how they engage with the online space. This can be seen physically, with all participants reporting pain predominantly in their shoulders and back as a result of being seated for numerous hours in front of their device. The negative relationship can also be seen mentally, as described by the participant's descriptions of an increase in feelings of stress as well as disengagement and hypo-arousal. It can be concluded that participants are aware of how the online space affects them physically and mentally. All participants also take the time to carry out self-care for themselves, which takes the form of physical movement and stepping away from the online space to spend time in nature. However, the steps of self-care are treating the negative symptoms of spending too much time online. The relief brought on by self-care is temporary, with the physical pain and feelings of being mentally drained returning once the participants return to the online learning space.

The institutional support given to the participants as they transitioned to online is very context specific, with this group of participants all coming from the same department within the university. The feedback shows that their specific department was excellent in providing individual support and aid throughout the transition to online learning. Some examples of this support was the department reaching out to students to donate devices, or shortening lectures when students expressed feeling overwhelmed. Along with this, small adjustments were made within the course to better assist online learning, like creating peer assessments and pre-recorded lessons that students could watch on their own time. This shows that when technical and practical aid and smaller, more personal community is provided, it has a significant impact on the overall online learning experience. Taking note of how important community is within the South African context, this also served a supportive role during a time of profound isolation and separation with everyone practicing social distancing and not having in-person contact classes. A point that came up in the responses of the questionnaires was that as participants in their post-graduate years, there was an already present disconnect from the larger university institution before the COVID pandemic hit the country. This brings to light an interesting dynamic that post-graduates have with their smaller department that they are in more regular contact with, in comparison to an increased distancing from the larger university administration (that more often deals with undergraduate queries) as well as the larger university student body made up of undergraduate students.

4.3. Recommendations

The first recommendation this study suggests is shorter time online, specifically referring to online engagement made up of traditional engagement where a lecturer presents, and the students watch and listen. For the participant group, there was online engagement incorporating embodiment through work with tactile objects like clay and using and engaging with music and drama. In discussion with university students outside of this course, there is the understanding that this embodied experience of learning is not the norm. For students who are only traditionally engaging with traditional forms of learning in the online space, it is harder to stay focused for longer periods of time. Another recommendation is to provide students with clear work timelines at the beginning of the semester. This timeline speaks to the length online classes will be. This will give students an outline of the pace and efficiency they need to be working at. It also gives room for students to prepare themselves for what is expected of them. With the results of the questionnaires in mind, it appears that shortening online class time (like zoom sessions or Microsoft team sessions) will create less mental drain, allow students to work with more breaks so that they are not in physically stationary positions in front of a device for long hours at a time, which may leave students with more energy to finish assignments. The research process of this Research Paper has shown that there is a need to provide postgraduate South African University students with ways to consistently support themselves physically and emotionally while learning online. This should be implemented on a departmental level in universities, as support from that level has been shown to be more effective and accessible for a postgraduate student. It also creates more opportunity for smaller and more direct community building and engagement, a factor that has been shown to assist in improving the level of support students feel while online. Another recommendation is to not only offer support on how to technically work on devices from home, but also provide training or workshops for learners that incorporate mindfulness and somatic techniques that equip students to look after themselves physically. Mindfulness-Based Programmes teach individuals how to pay attention to what is currently happening to them, with an open, curious, and non-judgmental attitude (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Bishop, Lau, Shapiro, Carlson, Anderson, & Carmody, 2004). In the context of online learning during the COVID pandemic, mindfulness holds the potential to bring about greater resiliency in students. The increase in awareness must not just extend to the

mindset, but also to an increase in awareness of what is happening for the student physically. If students are taught and encouraged to exercise mindfulness around how their body is reacting to online learning spaces, it has the possibility to decrease or stop the potential of harmful habitual patterns from forming. For example, if a student spends an hour in front of a computer hunched over and unconsciously holding tension in their body, after an hour they will walk away with physical pain. But if they are trained to notice when their back starts hunching over or when they start angling themselves in front of their computer in such a way that causes them to tighten and their back to be in misalignment, they can take note of the moment that happens and shift to a more neutral and optimal position. This could be implemented through short sessions either before or after an online class session where a trained professional could facilitate a group in which the students are practically shown how to increase their awareness of their own habitual patterns and what an optimal way of physically supporting themselves looks like. In the next chapter I will go into greater detail about the specific somatic techniques that can be used to encourage optimal movement and consequently an optimal mental state by linking these recommendations with the creative research I carried out on myself.

4.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research shows that from a group of post-graduate participants from the University of the Witwatersrand, there is evidence of a negative relationship between online learning and the impact it had on mental health and physical health. The importance of creating a community to provide support for online learning was highlighted through the research. Along with the importance of community, further investigation and questioning is needed in exploring potential isolation faced by postgraduate students in a time where isolation is being experienced, and support needs to be offered to encourage students working online to cope with a world-wide pandemic. Recommendations to assist students who are learning online include: shorter periods of time being stationary in front of the computer, more opportunities to reach out to smaller departments within the university structure for assistance, creative ways to connect individuals with each other and their respective departments to create smaller circles of online community, and workshops to train students how to become aware of themselves holistically, how to notice harmful habitual patterns, and ways of navigating and moving in an optimal way.

Chapter Five

Bridging experiences to understand the larger ethnographic experience of South African Masters University students

This research first started because I believed that I had found a way to work through harmful side effects I was experiencing while learning online. Through discussion with my peers, I realised that this might be knowledge that I could share to assist others who were in a similar situation. But before I could do that, I had to understand what the experiences of others were. In this chapter, I bridge the conclusions and lessons I learned from my own creative research with the experiences of others as examined through the research conducted in this study with the participant group. The findings from this research points to the value that somatic approaches could hold as an avenue for supporting online learning. This knowledge is then framed through understanding the current forms of mental health support available within South African universities.

5.1 The intersection of personal creative research with findings from other research participants

I created my personal creative research experiment in order to find out how I could alleviate the negative symptoms I was experiencing as a result of working online. Because of the three years of groundwork I did during my undergraduate degree in examining and challenging my own habitual patterns through an increased awareness in how my body carries itself, I was very aware of how online learning negatively impacted me. I took note of how, after being in front of my computer for a long time, I would slowly become more irritated and uncomfortable and frustrated. I was not doing anything to diffuse these feelings. This spoke to how unconsciously, at that time, I was unregulated. Being unregulated, or being emotionally dysregulated, describes the "inability to regularly use healthy strategies to diffuse or moderate negative emotions" (Rolston & Lloyd-Richardson, 2016:2). The moment I took the steps to distance myself from the online space and find ways of processing these emotions, I allowed regulation to occur. Because the research participant group was made up of individuals training as therapists, they all came from a course

that encourages an awareness of the self. All of the participants knew, either consciously or unconsciously, that they had to find ways to diffuse their negative emotions. In all of the questionnaires, a common theme in what the participants did for self-care, or rather what they did to allow for emotional regulation, was physical exercise, be it walking or yoga and stretching. These are all healthy strategies for regulation.

It should be noted that this knowledge of how to regulate oneself might not be common knowledge for South African university students and may be restricted to courses within the Humanities departments or Psychology departments. The original design for this research was to use a participant group made up of master's students from multiple different universities within South Africa. However, the steps needed to gain access to these different participants included gaining permission from the different universities as well as within the different departments. This was a step that was needed before ethical clearance could be given. That means that the research would have had to be put on a substantial hold while waiting to receive permission from the universities, and to then wait for ethical clearance to be given, with all of this taking place before participants are even contacted to ask to join the research study. Therefore, in the interests of practicality and focus, the participant group was formed by students within a university and within a department I knew I would be able to access within the given time frame, as well as with participants I knew had experienced predominantly online learning for the course of their Masters degree.

While carrying out my creative research, I spent a lot of time finding moments to de-role from being in the online space, through checking in with how my body was feeling and how I was feeling emotionally. I spent many hours creating a process where I could unpack and let go of tension. Because I knew what it felt like to let go of the tension brought about by spending time online, I knew when I was re-experiencing those tensions. It had a cyclical nature where I would spend time online, experience tension, de-role to release the tension, and go back on to the online space and experience tension once again. This awareness that categorised my personal experience could account for the feelings of frustration and irritation that was missing from the larger research participant group, who might not have had the same embodied training as myself. There was only one other participant in the group who mentioned similar feelings of frustration. They commented that “Overall it has been a difficult transition that made learning frustrating and I am not sure if it will ever stop being frustrating because we are human beings and learn faster from being in direct

contact with each other". However, the intersection between my personal findings and the findings from the research participants is that the online space had a negative impact physically and emotionally. The physical impact was predominantly seen through pain in the neck, shoulder, and back areas. There was also a similar experience of online learning negatively impacting mental health. This conclusion was arrived at through participants sharing that working online was stressful for them, and they experienced feelings of disconnection, isolation, and lack of motivation. These findings support the hypothesis that there can be a negative relationship at work when it comes to online learning and answers the research question relating to the physical and mental implications of online learning for South African university students.

5.2. The role of movement and somatic approaches as a form of support for online learning

> *"The astonishing structure of the body and the amazing actions it can perform are some of the greatest miracles of existence. Each phase of a movement, every small transference of weight, every single gesture of any part of the body reveals some feature of our inner life."*
>
> (Laban, 1980: 19)

Sitting in front of a screen for an average time of 3-6 hours per day was the norm for the participants who took part in this study. This is time separate from their usual time spent online recreationally. The result of learning online has caused a physical and practical shift in their life where it is necessary to be seated in front of a device. Pre-COVID-19 students would have had in-person classes for 4-6 hours per day, followed by additional hours online for research or assignments. With the introduction of online learning, that class time is spent online, followed by the additional research and completion of assignments also happening online. It is not the presence of a technological device that is causing the negative experience, but rather the prolonged engagement of working on that device. It is this prolonged period of time where the student is experiencing stillness or rigidness while spending time online that is creating a negative impact within the body of the student. Some core fundamental beliefs in the work of Rudolf Laban, the founding father of expressionist dance theory, is that a person's inner life is expressed through

movement, movement bridges a person's inner life and their external world, what happens in the outside world affects us internally, and significant internal movement will affect how we present ourselves in the external world (Thornton, 1996: para 6).

On a global scale the Covid pandemic resulted in a nationwide isolation. The introduction of a period of hard lockdown (Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020) halted everyday movement, be it going to shops, visiting friends and family, or even going out to restaurants. There was a worldwide state of stillness and isolation. For my classmates and I, on top of this halted movement there was a shift to stillness in our studies. Not only did our classes start later than expected, but we no longer had to walk from class to class, get to socialise with friends, and experience in-person learning. Connecting this new way of moving and expressing (or rather lack thereof) in relation to Laban's fundamental beliefs, as quoted previously (Thornton, 1996: para 6), it can be said that the loss of movement and physical expression has had an impact on the internal world of the university student, in terms of creativity, spontaneity, and their resiliency. In the sharing of one participant, she found the lack of human connection and real-world stimulation very depressing as someone who views herself as extroverted and gaining energy through human interaction. In line with this offering of how online learning was connected with a lack in the physical world, another participant wrote that the physical and mental exhaustion caused by working online left them disengaged as they became "distracted and unstimulated". This shows the change that working online held for the participants in decreasing the effectiveness of their engagement with their work, previously experienced in a creative, embodied and inspired way.

Because the participant group of this study were already in touch with their emotions, they intuitively knew that they needed moments to allow for healthy self-regulation. Even with the participants taking time to look after themselves, be it through yoga or stretching or exercise, this seemed to be a form of activity that was only done once participants were in dire need of a release from the stress brought about from online learning.

From my creative research I discovered that the somatic approaches I was using to combat the effects of online learning had to be carried out in a ritualised way. In order for this ritual to become truly effective, I had to make it a part of my daily routine. It had to be something I did for myself before entering the online space so that I entered in a state of readiness, as well as something I did after being online as a form of release. It is this combination of continuous preparation and release

that allowed me to see optimal results. Ritual can be understood as the practice that makes structures, it is the practice that defines and authorises. Therefore, ritual plays a crucial role in practice as it becomes the "vehicle for all forms of authority" (Kelly & Kaplan, 1990:141). "We are constantly entering and exiting ritual roles, and that is how we remake some forms of authority and disempower others" (Kelly & Kaplan, 1990:141). From the data collected from the research participants, they indicate that they are aware of the importance of stepping away from online spaces. However, the act of sitting in front of the computer to learn online has become a ritual in their university career. It is a part of their life that defines and authorises harmful conditioning.

In order to overcome this, there has to be a way to disempower the harmful learning ritual, which could be sitting in a non-optimal way in front of a device or working for long periods of time online without taking a break. Something I discovered for myself during my own creative research exploration was that there needs to be a disempowerment of the harmful ritual surrounding online learning. In addition to this, there needs to be an empowerment of rituals that provide aid while learning online. There are steps that can be taken to create moments of aid, like taking a short walk or stretching, however the effectiveness of the aid can be increased by incorporating multiple kinds of somatic approaches that are known to support optimal functioning and structuring designated times in the day to carry out this supportive ritual. An applied example of this as taken from my own creative research would be to combine stretches that I know help target certain areas of tightness in my body, followed by functional stretches taken from the work of Bartenieff (1995), for example, which was created to assist individuals with Poliomyelitis. This takes my stretching from helpful (with my own knowledge), to optimal (where my own knowledge is strengthened by knowledge from others). This was carried out by allowing my body to do stretches that I felt would help loosen areas that were tight for that day particularly. These were stretches that I was taught during sports training and did not have to think too hard about carrying out, like touching my toes to stretch my back and hamstring muscles. I would then combine this knowledge of what felt right for me in the moment, with knowledge drawn from Bartenieff Fundamentals (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980; Bartenieff, 1955; Hackney, 2003; Woodruff, 1992), where I would have to be very intentional about how I carried out the movement and continuously refer to outside sources as a reference. It is this extra contribution from movement sequences and stretches that have been particularly constructed to have therapeutic benefits that took my ritual of aiding my body to a deeper level.

The role of including therapeutic forms of movement and performative physical work alongside a persons' already existing form of aid when trying to regulate themselves after being in an online space, means that they are deepening the effectiveness of their regulation. When a person is equipped with the knowledge of the relevant somatic approaches that assist optimal functioning, optimal physical functioning which in turn impacts optimal mental functioning, they are given the power to be the master of their own mental health. When this knowledge is put into practice in such a way that it becomes a ritual in that person's life, they are able to create a process that allows them to enrol themselves in a state that heightens their awareness of their body. This then enables them to protect themselves from harmful habitual patterns occurring while online, as well as de-role themselves after being online. This allows for the release of tension that could have taken place and reconnects their mind-body connection which would have been put under strain in the online space.

5.3 The feasibility of somatic approaches as a form of mental health support within the South African university structure

In this study, research participants were asked about the kind of support that was provided for them by their university during the transition to online learning as well as during the period of permanent online learning. Because the participant group was limited to the University of the Witwatersrand, the findings are limited to only that university. One participant said that the university advertised to the students that they were able to directly speak to someone if they were struggling with anything through an open-door policy, and that the university encouraged the use of mental health services, both on and off campus. Another participant said that the university provided a free 24 hour mental health helpline they could contact for assistance along with a careers and counselling development unit which could be contacted when facing various challenges. Participants seemed to be aware of the structures put in place to provide mental health support. However, all of these forms of support are inherently Western. Despite having knowledge about the support available, none of the participants mentioned making use of the support. This could possibly be linked to their degree work which allows them to engage in content that has therapeutic potential, decreasing the need to actively seek out external therapeutic support. A potential shortcoming of the research questions could have been not asking if participants attend therapy or use mental health support

services outside of their university. This would have brought with it debates around private versus public mental health support structures.

This research paper has shown the value of somatic approaches, especially within the South African context where western forms of support could fall short in a third world country, and may not be culturally appropriate. More research would need to be conducted about the efficacy of the current forms of support available, however if the various services that offered more traditional support, like counselling and therapy, were equipped with sharing and facilitating more somatic approaches with university students, students would be given the power to carry out therapeutic techniques for and on themselves. In this case it is important to mention that there would need to be certain safety mechanisms in place to make sure the knowledge that is being shared is understood by the student and that they have a certain level of efficacy in carrying it out. This becomes embodied knowledge they can permanently have with them and use for themselves when feeling either overwhelmed from online learning or that they need to carry out a process of self-regulation in a tension-filled moment.

In 2016, a process was started at the University of Cape Town to develop a student mental health policy (Kaminer & Shabalala, 2019). It should be noted that this would have taken place before the COVID pandemic. In reviewing this process the issues that came up included the increase of complex student mental health difficulties overtime and a lack of capacity by campus service providers to keep up with the need for mental health services, an institutional culture of silence concerning mental health, discrimination and insensitivity from university staff towards students living with mental illness, and finally, "a lack of awareness or inaccurate information about reasonable accommodations and concessions that are available to support students with mental health difficulties" (Kaminer & Shabalala, 2019: 198).

In the process of creating this policy, competing discourses came up. These were categorised as a health discourse and a social justice discourse. A very Western lens of what mental health means was preferred, as promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Global Mental Health Movement (GMHM). Within the health discourse, the policy became an assumed, medicalized and individualised view of student mental illness which should be understood, accommodated and treated by the institution. Within the social justice discourse the contestation of the discourse is that the crisis of student mental health is not a reflection of an increasingly

mentally disordered student population (as viewed from a Western frame), but rather, failures of institutional transformation. The problematic lenses of this health discourse and social justice discourse seems to serve only to maintain systems of institutional oppression. “Addressing student mental health difficulties requires meaningful transformation of the entire institution” (Kaminer & Shabalala, 2019:199-200).

The scope of attempting to create a feasible form of mental health support within the entire South African university structure falls beyond the scope of this research paper. However, finding ways to equip individuals who already make up the mental health support structures could be a good starting point. If they are trained and educated on the use of somatic approaches, they would be able to pass that knowledge on and facilitate it with university students in need so that students are empowered to help and regulate themselves emotionally by working with their bodies to aid their mental state. The somatic approaches discussed in this research paper hold the view that each individual is unique and focus on optimal functioning instead of functioning that is right or wrong. This is an approach which could possibly bypass the problematic forms of current mental health support that views the student in need as limited to their disease or disorder and needing clinical treatment or medication.

5.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, spending too many hours online results in de-regulation as experienced by the participant group and myself. The steps taken for healthy forms of regulation all have similar qualities, in that they include a physical stepping away from the online space, with an incorporation of physical movement of the body. This stepping away is prompted by the experienced negative physical and internal impact of online learning. The current format of online learning creates a harmful ritual which needs to be combated through creating a separate ritual that challenges the harmful pattern of sitting in front of a computer or laptop for many hours and becoming lethargic or drained.

The research conducted amongst this particular group of participants shows that there is an inherent form of knowledge of how to combat the negative experiences of online learning. Within my own creative research, I have discovered that when this inherent form of knowledge is

combined with other knowledge of somatic approaches that needs to be actively sought out, the healing potential is taken to a greater level. Once this knowledge is embodied in a ritualised process, there is an increase in awareness and imagination, resulting in a more optimal way of engaging not just with oneself, but also oneself within the online learning space.

Within the structure of the University of the Witwatersrand, there are forms of mental health support being offered. However, in this specific research, there was a lack of information due to the participants not directly engaging with what was available. Drawing on sources from previous studies (Kaminer & Shabalala, 2019), mental health support structures within South African universities have shown to not be completely effective as they fail to take into account multiple contextual factors that influence the well-being of a student's mental state. These contextual factors include social, economic, political, racial, and historical factors. This shows that the inclusion of a form of mental health support that considers the whole individual in a holistic way could be extremely beneficial within the South African context. The study carried out by Kaminer & Shabalala (2019) has shown that policies can be created and implemented within South African universities. This hints that the potential for a policy or structure that includes somatic approaches within the mental health support structure is feasible.

Chapter Six
Conclusion

The final chapter of this Research Report will briefly comment on the current state of mental health within South Africa and its universities, as indicated in the literature. The contextual elements that impact a person's mental state during lockdown and online learning need to be acknowledged. I believe that university students would greatly benefit from the individualised and personalised type of intervention characterised by somatic therapeutic approaches. I will also map out practical ways in which the somatic approaches I carried out within my own creative research can be utilised as a form of support for South African University students, as a way to provide support for healthy self-regulation while working online.

6.1. The need for mental health support for South African Masters University students

In South Africa, the majority of individuals do not have access to adequate mental health support. There has been an attempt to create legislative and policy direction in creating access to mental health care for South Africans, however, issues remain around bridging policy development and implementation. It appears that the lack of a sustainable funding model is the cause for this gap, along with "exclusion of mental health practitioners from the consultative process" leading to policy development, and limitations connected to the "implementation of experiential knowledge-informed policies" (Nguse & Wassenaar, 2021:305-306). I include Arts therapists as well when it comes to the possible exclusion of mental health practitioners from the consultative process. And even within South African universities there is a similar theme of mental health support systems being in place but not operating to their full potential and not meeting the collective needs of students.

A recent study was conducted, looking at the mental health and well-being of South African undergraduate students at a large urban university (Eloff & Graham, 2020). The results show a significant decline in the mental health of the students over the course of the academic year. The significant decrease indicated the need for substantive interventions that would be able to address

and support self-efficacy, a sense of direction, a sense of meaning, and creating a sense of belonging for the students. Even with the support structures that were in place, the fact that there was a steady and significant decline in mental health and well-being shows that somewhere within the current system, even with large and established universities, there are gaps (Eloff & Graham, 2020:1). Major influences that contribute to this inadequacy include but are not limited to systematic cycles of oppression within South African society that impact mental health negatively. In these cases, the symptoms of negative mental health are being treated (or treatment is attempted) without considering the root issue, be it ancestral trauma or historical oppression. In the case of historical oppression, the trauma is relational, in that it occurs on the level of relationships as humans are social beings. In this social relationship, the racialised are permanently othered. In situations where trauma has occurred in connection with racism, the nervous system actually imprints the experience, and this has been shown to be passed down for up to seven generations (Avalos, 2001). This is one example that demonstrates the complexities that come with the contextual issues that affect mental health.

The impact that this holds in terms of mental health needs to be looked at in a holistic way as it impacts not just a person's mental state, but also their physical health, their view of their identity, and their purpose. Ultimately, how they function and operate within society. There is a definite need for a more embodied approach to supporting and aiding mental health, within South African universities as it is this embodied approach that is able to address issues that more traditional forms of support might be missing. Looking at these contextual hardships that impact an individual, the importance of providing support that also takes into account the issues that contextual influences and online learning brings with it, cannot be understated.

6.2. Somatic approaches as a way to provide and support self-regulation and coping

In developing an intervention for South African university students that aids and supports healthy regulation and coping while online, there has to be a bridging between what the student does for themselves intuitively, and knowledge drawn from somatic approaches that are proven to be beneficial. In this next section, I will provide a practical example of the kind of knowledge that would be helpful to impart to current members involved in the university support structures. It is important to note this Research Report analyses practice-led research, which means that I am drawing directly from my own training experience, and the specialized knowledge that resulted

from this training, combined with my own lived experience. Thus, there are limitations to the range of knowledge I can bring to the research and offer to a possible intervention strategy. However, it is offered as a start, a beginning that holds much potential if applied on a large-scale basis within a South African university structure.

The first point that needs to be communicated to someone who would be carrying out an intervention like this would be the importance in distinguishing not what is right or wrong, but what is optimal. Every person's experience will be different because their lived experience is different, their biological makeup is different, and the way their body moves is different. Woodruff (1992) beautifully describes how the work of Ingrid Bartenieff supports this.

> *"Bartenieff's work with movement always stressed the wholeness of the organism and taught that even though the focus is on a body part or upon the character of the movement at a given moment, the whole person will be affected by what the practitioner or mover does. Training and therapy in Fundamentals empowers the mover by making more choices available through stimulation of new patterns thereby enhancing the mover's adaptability"*
>
> (Woodruff, 1992: 4)

In my own creative research process, I had to become aware of how I felt online learning was limiting my physical movement, and I then used the Bartenieff Fundamentals of movement as a way to address those limitations. It is important to acknowledge that throughout the three years of my undergraduate training, I was able to learn and engage with embodied work from Laban and Bartenieff through multiple lecturers who were trained professionals in these somatic approaches. Because of this prior training I was comfortable enough to carry this out on my own. If somatic approaches like Laban movement analysis (Laban & Ullmann, 1971; Levy & Duke, 2003; Loman & Brandt, 1992; Thornton, 1996; Tsachor & Shafir, 2017) and Bartenieff Fundamentals (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980; Bartenieff, 1955; Hackney, 2003; Woodruff, 1992) were to be used to help other university students, it would have to take the form of a short workshop where a professional would be able to guide participants through the basic understanding of the movements safely. Bartenieff Fundamentals are "movement sequences for training or retraining a person's functional and expressive capacities" (Woordruff, 1992:8). For example, when I was working

online I became aware that I leaned to the left side of my body while on Zoom, as well as when I wrote notes in my notebook while in online class. This then made me aware of tension in my upper right body caused by my shoulders and spine compensating for the lean. To try and address this, I used the Bartenieff Fundamental of the Body Half. To carry out the Body Half you lie down on the floor in an x shape, and flex the right half of your body, bringing your right knee and right elbow together. After flexing your leg and arm, you return back to an X shape and this is repeated on the left side (Woordruff, 1992:12). By taking the time to sense and understand the process of how each side of my body moved, I was able to become more aware of the right side of my body which was carrying tension caused by leaning to the left while working. In carrying out the Body Half exercise it felt like a realignment and a reconnection with both halves of my body. This reconnection allowed me to become more aware when I started falling back into the habit of leaning and caused me to react in a way that felt optimal, which in this case was to release the tension on the right side of my body and engage both sides equally so that I could sit up straight without causing tension on either side of my shoulders. "The movement work is directed toward sensing and appreciating the process of one's movement, usually taken for granted until it becomes dysfunctional or lost" (Woodruff, 1992:13). I was able to know what felt optimal for me because of the time I spent engaging with this exercise before stepping into the online space.

An important basic element that needs to be incorporated in this kind of intervention is breath. Because COVID-19 causes respiratory infections, masks were worn as a way of spreading infection (cite). In my own experience of wearing a mask, especially in busy spaces and when it is warm, I have felt a decrease in the quality of my breathing. This is not linked to the actual effectiveness of a mask when it comes to breathing, but rather the sensation of something covering my mouth and nose. This feeling then manifests itself through subconsciously taking shorter and quicker breaths. If I am out in public for most of the day, this means I am experiencing the feeling of not optimally breathing for most of the day. In discussing breath, it is relevant to briefly take note of the experience of wearing masks during COVID-19. However, the impact that masks have on optimal breathing is not covered within this Research Paper. Rather, the influence of breath is looked at as a way to support the preparing and de-rolling from the online space. In Bartenieff Fundamentals breathing is used to activate internal connections that are key to dynamic rather than static movement (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980:21 as cited in Woodruff, 1992:96). I believe that in

activating these internal connections, the bottom-up approach is tapped into. Van der Kolk (2014) explains the bottom-up approach as the use of the body to shift structures in the emotional part of the brain. The difference between quickly rushing through a set of stretches and mindfully stretching as a way to intentionally release tension and become more in tune with the body, is breath. In my creative research process, I would start my de-rolling ritual with some deep breaths and a focus on using my breath to support my movements through any physical motions using my body, like while stretching. As time progressed, I found that I was able to become more aware of my breath and this awareness was carried through to when I would work online, resulting in my being able to regulate myself through taking deep breaths when I would become anxious or overwhelmed. This made me aware of the importance of continuous engagement with this type of mindfulness, as the longer I did it, the more benefits I received in terms of greater awareness and effectiveness in decreasing negative impacts from online learning. In a study researching the effects of mindfulness-based therapeutic interventions, participants engaging in "eight weeks of mindful breath awareness meditation" showed an increase in their performance on a range of cognitive tasks (Schöne, Gruber, Graetz, Bernhof, & Malinowski, 2018). Combining this research (Schöne et al, 2018) along with my own findings shows how breath can be used to assist optimally in navigating the online space as an opportunity for relief as well as to increase cognitive abilities. In the research carried out in this Research Report, most of the participants spoke about feeling disconnected and disengaged from learning while online. If mindful ways of using breath were to be included in an intervention for students, it would help with focus and cognition, as well as with relaxation and release of tension. This could be implemented through a set of mindful breathing exercises or through encouraging a deeper awareness of breath, once again, carried out through a training workshop.

An interesting take on a somatic approach in assisting with ways to physically work with the body to help assist internal regulation, is the inclusion of Laban, specifically Laban movement analysis (Laban & Ullmann, 1971; Levy & Duke, 2003; Loman & Brandt, 1992; Thornton, 1996; Tsachor & Shafir, 2017). Dance movement psychotherapy is a form of therapy that has drawn on the ability of movement to facilitate therapeutic benefits, such as changing emotional expression and thereby changing emotional state (Tsachor & Shafir, 2017). The four main categories that classify movement components within Laban movement analysis are: Body, Effort, Space, and Shape

(Tsachor & Shafir, 2017). An example to understand how these components can be combined to support understanding of an emotion, would be: the feeling of anger characterised by strong, sudden, advancing or direct movement. Or the feeling of fear, which is characterised by retreating, condensing, enclosing, or moving back. Laban movement analysis (Laban & Ullmann, 1971; Levy & Duke, 2003; Loman & Brandt, 1992; Thornton, 1996; Tsachor & Shafir, 2017) gives the language to describe the physical characteristics of an emotion. I was able to use Laban movement analysis to provide the adequate vocabulary in documenting what the characteristics of my baseline are while online, and while not working online. I did this by recording myself, rewatching this video recording of myself and paying attention to how my body moved, and characterising my habitual patterns using the Laban movement analysis movement components in order to name what my Body, Effort, Space and Shape qualities were. Having the ability to quantify terms that describe how my body moves allowed me to try and challenge that baseline by working towards the opposite of that characteristic. For example, I noticed that after a while my body would start retreating from my computer screen by leaning back and creating a sinking shape. This is connected with feelings of sadness. The opposite of sadness is happiness, which is characterised by free, light, and upward qualities. I used this to experiment with how I engaged online. So I would write free, light, and upward on a piece of paper next to my laptop, and try to remind myself to embody those qualities while online. What I found would happen is that my concentration and mood was higher while I embodied those qualities, even if I was not necessarily focused or happy before. This was a practical moment where I experienced the benefits of understanding my body and shifting it to a physical external position that held internal benefits. Once again, I was able to do this because of previous training and knowledge on the subject that was taught to me by professionals. If this type of training is provided on a wider scale and made accessible to more learners in universities, they would be able to challenge their own baseline movement characteristics to support them while online if they are experiencing a lack of focus or lack of energy.

Once again, I would like to reiterate that I was able to explore and carry out elements of these somatic approaches on myself because of the extensive past training I had been given by professionals trained in Bartenieff Fundamentals (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980; Bartenieff, 1955; Hackney, 2003; Woodruff, 1992) and Laban movement analysis (Laban & Ullmann, 1971; Levy

& Duke, 2003; Loman & Brandt, 1992; Thornton, 1996; Tsachor & Shafir, 2017). In mental health support systems, there are people being trained to carry out ways of providing assistance using more Western forms of support, like counselling. It is interesting to think about how mental health support effectiveness within universities might shift if people are trained in somatic approaches so they can assist students through facilitating embodied interventions and sharing knowledge that the student can take away with them as a learned coping skill. This does raise questions about structures that would need to be in place, the number of trained professionals that would be needed to roll out this kind of intervention that is based on individual impartation and workshops. However, noting how the current systems seem to not be working as effectively as believed in their planning stages, it could be beneficial to look at somatic approaches and see if they are able to be practically carried out.

6.3. Recommendations

Using questionnaires, this research paper has found that within the participant group made up of seven students from the University of the Witwatersrand, there appears to be a negative relationship with online learning for the majority of the participant group. Along with the researcher's own negative relationship with online learning, this shows that for some university students there is a negative impact taking place that needs to be looked at. It is important to note that this Research Paper is not negating the useful role that online learning has had in allowing classes and learning to carry on during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has played an incredibly helpful role, however this has brought along with it negative effects that need to be accounted for to result in optimal engagement with online learning. To summarize some of the negative side effects, they are but not limited to physical pain in the neck, back, and shoulder areas, and increase in perceived feelings of stress, and emotional sensations of dysregulation. The data collected from the participants show that the participants were aware of the indications that's online learning placed on their mental health. Once again, taking note that this perception could be due to the participant group already being self aware as a result of therapeutic training they received within their course as training Drama Therapists.

The negative relationship that is occurring between university students and the online space means that steps need to be considered to introduce adequate forms of support for these groups of students. Somatic approaches like Laban movement analysis (Laban & Ullmann, 1971; Levy &

Duke, 2003; Loman & Brandt, 1992; Thornton, 1996; Tsachor & Shafir, 2017), Bartenieff Fundamentals (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980; Bartenieff, 1955; Hackney, 2003; Woodruff, 1992), and embodiment (Jennings & Holmwood, 2016; Jones, 1994; Koch & Fischman, 2011; Munro, 2018; Milioni, 2007), were used within creative research previously carried out by the researcher to form an example or case study that could be looked at to see the practical applications to support online learning optimally. Looking at how these somatic approaches were used within the creative research, this research paper recommends that individuals who are already in mental health support roles within university structures would benefit from training that allows them to incorporate more mindful-based-techniques, like optimal breath support for example. This would provide a more holistic and somatic approach to the types of support that are available for university students outside of more traditional forms of support like support call centers where the level of engagement is limited. Along with equipping the individuals who are a part of the mental health support structure within a university, this research paper also advocates for professionals who are trained in somatic approaches like Arts Therapists, Dance/ Movement Therapists, and Drama Therapists who would have extensive training in more somatic forms of mental health support. If these professionals are brought into the university mental health support structure, there is the potential that the techniques they are trained in will allow them to facilitate a type of intervention that looks at the individual as a whole and works through what is optimal for the individual, instead of what is classified as healthy according to more western forms of mental health.

This research paper also advocates and gives practical examples for how somatic approaches can be used to address healthy forms of emotional regulation while learning online. Ultimately, this can be used as a way to provide support internally and mentally by creating habitual patterns that result in optimal physical engagement with online learning through a bottom-up approach where shifts in the body create shifts in the mind.

6.4. Limitations

In order to create research that is well rounded, limitations within the study need to be looked at. The first limitation within the research that was conducted in this Research Paper was within the participant group. The original concept for this research was to create a contextual understanding of the larger experience of South African Masters University students. However due to time

restrictions, this meant that a much smaller group was used. Because this smaller participant group was made of Masters Drama Therapy students, their experience of online learning included more work with embodiment where during online classes steps were taken to allow for a more holistic experience due to the nature of their work. For example, the Masters Drama Therapy students would at times be encouraged to take their course work and find creative ways of presenting it to their classmates over Zoom to try to negate the traditionally stagnant form that teaching online takes. Within this participant group where steps were taken to try to make online learning more embodied, there were still negative side effects experienced by the participants as shown in the data collected. It would have strengthened this research if another participant group was also used outside of the Humanities faculty. This would have allowed the online learning experience of Masters students whose course content involved more quantitative work (like Engineering or Accounting) to be compared with the experience of Masters students whose course included more qualitative work (like Drama Therapy).

Another limitation of this study is the potential biases of the researcher's experience with online learning. Because my experience was predominantly negative, this framed the research as an exploration for a hypothesized problem. The hypothesis was supported in the data obtained from the participant group, but by framing the online learning experience as negative, the positives of online learning were not looked at in detail.

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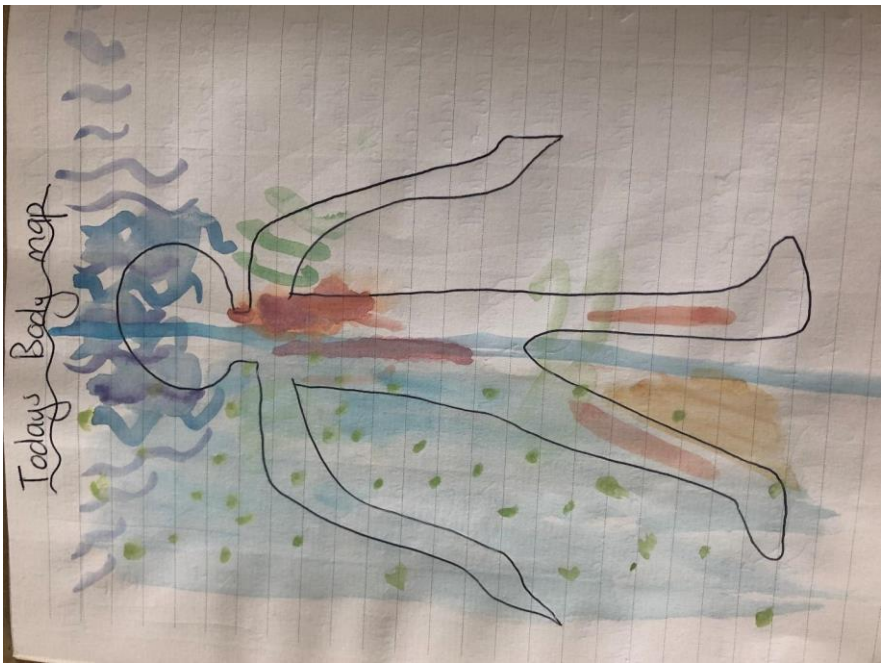
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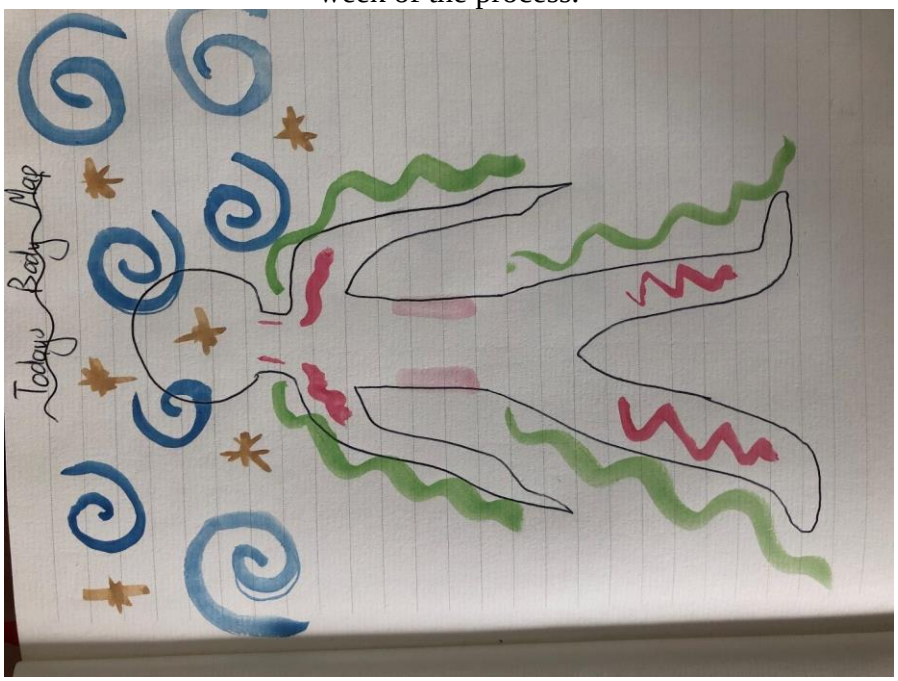
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List of Appendices

Appendix A: Examples of Body Mapping

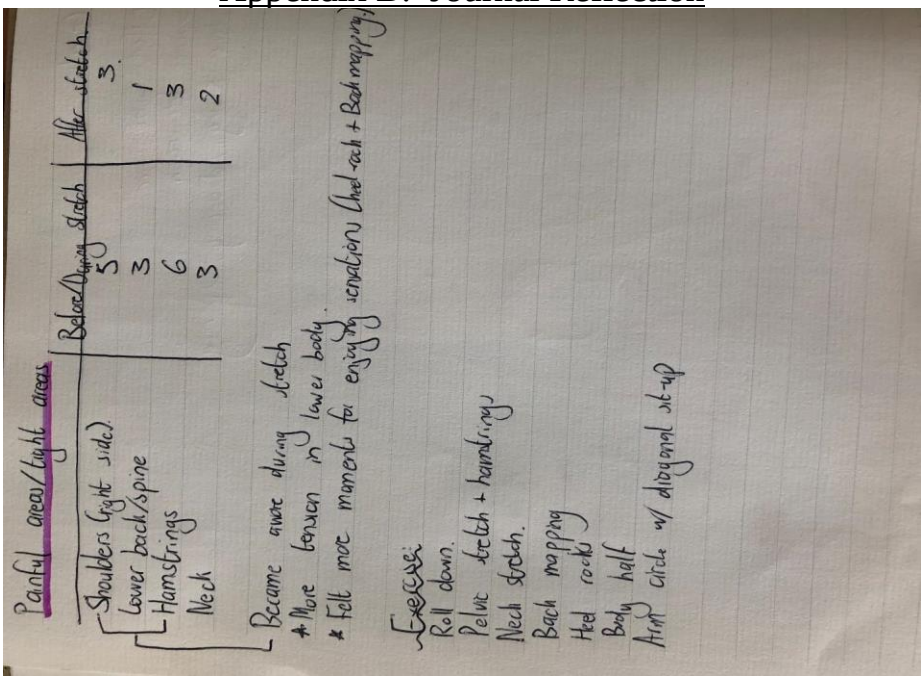


An image of a body map taken from my creative research journal during the first week of the process.

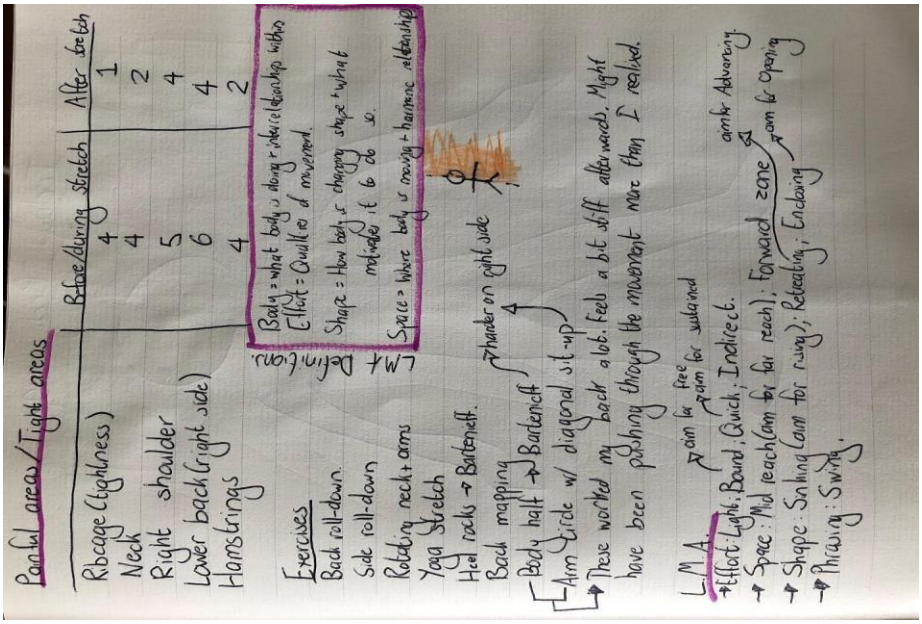


Another image taken from my creative journal a few weeks into my de-rolling ritual. The images and colouring around the head area show the improvement in my internal, mental state, compared to the one above.

Appendix B: Journal Reflection



A page from my creative research journal documenting my pain levels before and after my stretching/de-rolling ritual.



A page from my creative research journal showing my baseline qualities using Laban Movement Analysis at the bottom of the page.

Appendix C: Questionnaire

Questionnaire

Researcher: Elayne Sinclair

MA Drama Therapy student registered at the University of the Witwatersrand

Research Title: Outside in: Practice as research- Exploring the use of somatic approaches to address self-regulation for South African University Masters students learning online.

Instructions to help participants in answering the questions:

1. Please answer straightforwardly as possible
2. Should any questions be confusing please contact me via email

1.1. On average, how many hours a day do you spend online, doing class work (I.e., Tasks, assignments, reading, peer assessments etc.)?

_____

1.2. On average, how many hours a day do you spend online, outside of class work (I.e., watching movies, social media etc.)?

_____

1.3. Please tick the response you agree with.

- I prefer working online for 6 hours at a time
- I prefer working online for 3 hours at a time
- I prefer working online for 1 hour at a time
- I prefer working online less than an hour at a time

1.4. Please provide a single word that represents your feelings toward online learning.

_____

2.1. Do you experience any physical pain or discomfort while working online?

- Yes
- No

2.2. If you answered yes to 2.1. in which areas of the body do you experience the pain (e.g., shoulder, neck, etc.).

_____

2.3. If you answered yes to 2.1. how long do you have to work online before you notice any pain or discomfort? Please tick the response you agree with.

•Less than an hour •1-2 hours •3 hours or more •I do not notice how long it takes

2.4. If you answered yes to 2.1. do you find ways to alleviate the pain? (yes/no). If yes, what do you do?

_____

3.1. Does working online impact your stress levels?

- •Yes
- •No

3.2. How would you describe your mental state after spending time working online?

_____

3.3. If your answer was yes to 3.1. are you able to find ways to de-stress? (yes/no) If yes, please describe the steps you take to de-stress.

_____

3.4. After working online, do you feel mentally exhausted, neutral, or mentally energized? (Please circle or highlight the response you agree with).

4.1. Do you take time for self-care in your daily routine? If so, what does your daily self-care look like. If not, please explain why you do not take time for self-care in your daily routine.

_____

_____

4.2. Do you have a ritual or habit you do that prepares you for working online? If yes, please explain what it is and how it helps prepare you. If no, would having something that prepares you for the online space be something you are interested in?

_____

5.1. What is the name of the University you are currently attending?

_____

5.2. What steps, if any, did the University take to support the transition to online learning?

_____

_____

5.4. Does the University provide any additional support for online learning? (yes/no). If yes, what support is given? If no, what support would you like to be given?

_____

_____

5.5. How has online learning impacted your overall University experience?

_____

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire!

Researcher: Elayne Sinclair

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