



**Unfolding**  
Expand body movement → improve thinking → enjoy life more  
The Moving Mind  
Feldenkrais Centre  
[www.themovingmindcentre.com](http://www.themovingmindcentre.com)

## The Understanding Feldenkrais Series

### Vague or purposeful? Gaps in the Feldenkrais class.

*Lie on your back, I tell the students in my Feldenkrais class, bend your right knee, have the right foot standing, the left leg lying long. They position themselves accordingly. Now do something to slowly, gently raise the right side of your pelvis a little away from the floor. And then I pause a few moments while the students attempt to follow my instruction. I see signs of puzzlement, some students look around to see what others are doing. Different actions are done, no-one doing quite the same thing. Then I add in some more instructions, it becomes a little clearer, but I still make no comment on whether any student is 'correct' or not. And so the lesson proceeds, students exploring how they move, in their own way, with my instructions sufficient to get them to the next step in the lesson, but leaving room for interpretation.*

A component of Feldenkrais is the way in which group activities are structured. as a class with a teacher and students. There are many facets to good teaching as well as the actual content to be absorbed or learnt. All of us can think back to a good teacher and a special something that they had to stimulate the thinking of the student creating enjoyable and productive learning. To this end Feldenkrais teachers use a technique that could be labelled 'mind the gap' where a level of vagueness or incompleteness encourages the student to find their own solution to movement exercises.

Let me explore this idea by asking have you ever read a poem that you enjoyed immensely but were uncertain of the exactness of its meaning. A good poem leaves some gaps for the reader's own imagination to fill in. And a "good reader" can appreciate those gaps, enjoying an exercising of their creativity in filling in the gaps. (*Negative capability* is the technical term for these poetic gaps.) And this is the connection to Feldenkrais teaching, and good teaching in general - there are gaps left in which the student's thinking is stimulated.

The late Douglas Adams (*Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*) said "You're getting old if you're unable to cope with a new idea." The "good" student, the creative, intelligent individual, is receptive to new information, always eager to learn something new. So they can enjoy the gaps that are left, the leeway allowed for the imagination to work. They are willing to consider two or more sides to a question, or to leave a question unanswered for a while longer to allow time to explore many possible answers.



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In Feldenkrais we deliberately create some uncertainty, to encourage thinking. One very obvious way we do this is that we don't demonstrate how to do the movements (unlike nearly every movement / exercise discipline such as, for example, Yoga, Tai-chi, aerobics, ballroom dancing etc.) The student waits for the teacher to show them "the correct way" to do the movements ("should I turn my head with the knees or oppositely?") but the teacher never does!

We prefer to let the students find their own way to do the movements rather than copying the teacher's way. As a lesson proceeds each step is an invitation to explore, with no right or wrong answers, just a "what if?" "What if you roll your head to the left? ...what if you roll your head to the left but keep your eyes in the middle? ...what if you keep your head in the middle and turn just your eyes to the left?" ...and so on, the teacher asking a question and the student processing, finding the answer in their own body.

Gradually, with practice, the student becomes comfortable with the uncertainty and explores more freely (within clear parameters- it's not a creative dance class- there are specific positions and a structured sequence of movements *and* there are gaps for the student's intelligence to fill in).

The tolerance for uncertainty developed in the *Awareness Through Movement* class enhances the life skill for handling creatively the problems and uncertainties of the world outside the classroom - moving house, a job loss, the change in computer systems in an office, or an injury, to give some examples. It's interesting to observe people (and ourselves) in these situations of change- some respond creatively, constructively while others may respond out of fear or anger. Feldenkrais, I believe, makes people better learners, more comfortable with uncertainty or change and able to respond more productively and successfully.

There are also those who are injured, in pain or traumatised. They crave safety, security, or certainty. A visiting American Feldenkrais teacher, Deborah Bowes while presenting a workshop on chronic pain in Melbourne titled *Pain and Curiosity* said that those in pain lose their curiosity to explore as each movement outside a restricted range causes more pain. She said the role of the Feldenkrais practitioner is to gently, safely lead the person into a greater range of activity including regaining their curiosity and their tolerance for uncertainty.

The eager learner can even intentionally create their own incompleteness. The hypnoterapist, Dr Milton Erickson, did this in his early days as a psychiatrist working in a mental asylum. Before reading a patient's case history he would observe them and then invent a case history. Later he checked how much his invented record accorded with the actual history. In this way he sharpened his skills of observation and diagnosis.

A student receiving facts in a passive role usually does not learn much. If there are few demands on the student's thinking, less is understood or retained. A good teacher teaches the facts but an even better teacher will give some of the facts, then credit the student with some intelligence and *pause*, leave a gap for them to do some figuring out and to become actively involved.



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A good teacher may leave the student impressed with how clever the teacher is but a really good teacher, I believe, is one who leaves the student impressed with how clever the *student* is.

I always remember my piano teacher, who, in my first lesson, invited me to experiment with playing "just the black keys, they are a pentatonic scale, you hear it in Eastern music." And so I found, right from the beginning, I could create interesting, even beautiful sequences of notes, just by playing around a little. Also my ear and thinking were well prepared then for the more structured learning of notes, scales and pieces of music.

All of the above is not excusing sloppy teaching - that is teaching that is simply vague because the teacher is vague about what they are teaching. In leaving "gaps" the teacher needs to be very clear about what is to be said and what is left out, carefully judging how capable each student is.

So enjoy the gaps. Explore, experiment and play.

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About this article

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