I specialize in kinesthetic teaching, the use of creative movement in the classroom to teach across the curriculum. My techniques, in which I have trained hundreds of classroom teachers, release students from a passive learning posture—glued to their seats, dissociated, with decreased oxygen in their brains—and engage them physically and creatively with what they are learning. Simply by getting students out of their seats, we encourage new levels of self-discovery and self-expression. And by letting students experience the curriculum through their bodies, we help them make deeper emotional, interpersonal, and kinesthetic connections to academic subjects.

According to Harvard Medical School's Professor John Ratey, in a 2008 Education Week article, physical exercise "puts the brain of the learners in the optimal position for them to learn." My methods build upon this observation by bringing physical movement into the classroom and connecting it directly to the content of the curriculum. Imagine, for example, students sitting at a desk and listening to a teacher expound on a topic with a certain amount of dialogue, questions, and answers. Think about how much brain activity is being generated. Now imagine those students working with their classmates: figuring out how to show the causes of the American Revolution through whole body shapes; climbing into the skin of a literary character or improvising a creative-movement response to a plot element; enacting a journey through the water cycle; or arranging themselves as solid, liquid, and gas molecules to demonstrate density.

Such experiential learning can apply to math, science, history, literature, punctuation, grammar, and a range of other curricular subjects. By creating a rich contextual environment, kinesthetic learning constructs memories connected to time, place, and emotions, which we call episodic encoding. Students activate and integrate physical, emotional, and cognitive responses to what they are learning, making learning more meaningful. As neurophysiologist Carla Hannaford says in her book, Smart Moves: Why Learning is Not All in Your Head, "Movement anchors thought."

A Lifeline to Students
Often, children who have trouble reading or remembering information can increase self-confidence by learning through the body. It's not unusual for a class hierarchy to get reshuffled in the course of kinesthetic lessons, allowing such children to shine, which can have immediate carryover into other classroom activities. Success in the realm of creative movement grounds their understanding, so that communicating with words becomes less challenging. One teacher from Hudson, N.Y., described two boys who never raised their hands in class. During energetic sessions, they:

... smile, stay glued to the story, and interpret the character's feelings and actions with grace and creativity. They even volunteer to verbally respond to questions about the story. I think it is because they feel so grounded in their physical experience of listening through their bodies that they have a new confidence.

By teaching through the universal language of movement, we can offer a chance for real success to children who may be caught in a spiral of academic failure. At the very least,
kinesthetic teaching throws a lifeline to kinesthetic learners, who often can't sit still and are seen as disruptive or learning disabled. Allowing these students to become leaders can strengthen the learning community of the whole class.

By working together creatively—constructing a tableau (a group body sculpture) or a piece of choreography, for example—students acquire many skills they will need to be successful adults. They learn about communication and teamwork, giving and taking, leading and following, taking risks, being accountable, and giving and receiving affirmation. They learn about their individual responsibility for a successful group effort, and the role the group must play in supporting the needs of individuals. This also helps build a genuine learning community, as students become invested in the process and the product. In short, people who create and perform together simply feel a stronger bond than individuals who sit in separate seats facing a teacher.

In a traditional classroom, when a teacher asks a question, "Who can tell me ... ?" usually four or five hands go up. The teacher will call on one student, and perhaps on another few to see if their answers agree with the first, but the teacher will have no way of knowing what is going on in the heads of the other 20 students.

The kinesthetic teacher has a different approach. "Show me ... " Twenty-five students are being asked to respond physically to the question: Show me what comes first, the comma or the closed quotation mark. Show me if this is a series or parallel circuit. Show me an animal that lives in the rainforest; show me how the character feels just before the story's climax. Immediately, all of the students respond, and their learning is made visible. They have to think about what they are going to do, and literally take a stand. If they want to change their answer, they don't have to erase anything, they just change their pose. Rather than calling attention to the "mistake," the focus is on the "re-take," which lessens the fear of failure that is so prevalent among students today—and teachers can give immediate feedback to students (formative assessment) rather than waiting for a weekly or unit test.

For the sake of awakening and engaging our students in today's stressful, high-stakes academic climate, teachers can find new inspiration by embracing kinesthetic teaching. They need not be dancers or even comfortable with their bodies in order to use kinesthetic techniques effectively; they need only learn how to recognize the links between curriculum and creative movement, and then ask their students to embody learning.

**Susan Griss is the author of Minds in Motion: A Kinesthetic Approach to Teaching Elementary Curriculum, published by Heinemann. For over 15 years she has been on the graduate faculty of Bank Street College of Education in the Continuing Professional Studies Department, and the Creative Arts in Learning Division at Lesley University. Susan has been teaching as an artist-in-residence in the public schools for over 25 years. Visit her website:** [http://mindsinmotion.org/](http://mindsinmotion.org/)