

The Macro-Micro Connection

by Jason Erickson, CST, ACE-PT, NCTMB

"Life is made up of little things." - Proverb

In August 2007, I participated in a four-day seminar on Active Isolated Stretching and Strengthening (AIS). It was taught by Aaron Mattes, living legend and founder of the method. AIS is very different from Circular Strength Training® (CST), yet the two methods complement one another. During the seminar, I had many "Ah-ha!" moments that shed light on aspects of CST and situations I've encountered with clients and in my own practice. In this article, I will focus on what I call the "Macro-Micro Connection" and how it complements the Global-Local-Global strategy of CST.

When encountering a performance problem, CST looks at it from a Global perspective, analyzing Breath, Structure, and Movement (BSM) to determine the root of the issue. Once the apparent source is identified, we act Locally, working with simpler movements to resolve restrictions and improve BSM integration. As these improve, we look at the Global picture again, analyzing how the performance issue has changed to determine whether it has resolved or if further action is needed.

AIS, starts with what I call the "Macro" perspective: posture, health history, movement patterns, performance issues, etc. This is analyzed to determine where the client is likely to have the greatest movement restrictions. These are identified by muscle groups, or by individual muscles or attachments. On a "Micro" level, AIS methods are then employed to systematically explore, release, retrain, and strengthen specific tissues to improve health, ROM, and functional capabilities. As discomfort resolves and the stretched and strengthened areas improve, the client becomes able to live and perform at an enhanced level.

An "Ah-ha!" moment came when I realized that both CST and AIS use similar strategies but focus on different aspects of similar problems. AIS essentially views the body as a "kinematic chain" and tries to identify problems at a "tissue chain" level. Practitioners systematically work with remedial movement patterns that are assisted to varying degrees; oxygenation and actively working the affected tissues are critical to success. In working a basic level of motor skill, the body learns to release fascial restrictions, relax overactive tissues, and innervate underused tissues to restore balanced tone and improve functional ROM. In general, AIS emphasizes recovery of lost ROM prior to strengthening. (Sound familiar?)

CST tries to identify problems at a "kinetic chain" level, and works with sophisticated functional movements that may be adapted to the individual. When a complex movement problem is encountered, we look at how the client is able to perform simpler component movements. When the specific impediment is identified, drills or movements are introduced to train the desired skills/attributes. The client's breathing (oxygenation) and structure (entire body) must be properly integrated with their movement to achieve success. Along the way, fascial restrictions and overactive tissues (collectively known as "fear-reactivity") may be resolved to restore balanced tone and improve functional ROM, enabling better performance of more complex skills.

This approach can be adapted to address performance issues that are not related to tissue restrictions or other types of fear-reactivity. At times, it is difficult to determine the root of a performance problem. Finding the heart of it may require some experimentation. Randomly trying stuff may eventually yield results, but not without some confusion. Adopting a systematic approach to looking at smaller components of a larger picture gives better results, though it isn't always possible to resolve the problem directly. Here is a recent example:

"Claire" trained with me for a few months and got into good shape. One day she arrives and says

she didn't sleep well and isn't feeling great. In that session, her form suffers and she experiences several brief, intense dizzy spells. A breathing issue is identified as the potential source, and some drills are introduced to explore it further. She is asked to incorporate the drills into her personal practice sessions. The next session, "Claire" shows up feeling great, well rested with high energy. Before long, she is experiencing dizzy spells again. Though a breathing problem is potentially indicated, her health history is discussed and blood pressure issues come up. An exercise is selected and practiced with good form, with "Claire" reporting on how she feels throughout. She feels fine during the exercise, but a pattern of dizziness beginning 3-10 seconds after cessation of the activity is identified. The client's face does not redden when this occurs, indicating a rapid drop (rather than rise) in blood pressure. After the next set of exercise, "Claire" is instructed to rapidly walk around the room, and slow down very gradually. She reports only a very slight sense of dizziness which fades within seconds. The experiment is repeated several times, with identical results. "Claire" is instructed to incorporate the walking tactic into her personal practice sessions (if any) and to see her physician ASAP for medical guidance. Though reasonably successful, the walking tactic only ameliorates and does not resolve the source of the problem, necessitating referral to a medical professional.

More commonly, the underlying issue can be resolved with appropriate training, as in this recent example:

"Janet" reports trouble with Spinal Rocks, saying they "just don't feel smooth." She demonstrates the movement several times. Stiffness is noted in two parts of the movement, and her breathing isn't quite integrated. We review thoracic spine movements and pelvic movements, focusing on coordinating her breathing with spinal flexion and extension. Cat stretches are also explored to reinforce the patterns. "Janet" then works slow Spinal Rocks, trying to smooth them out. As she finds the groove, she learns to relax into the movement and allow it to create her breathing. Before long, her Spinal Rocks are comfortable and flowing.

CST's Global-Local-Global strategy is a powerful tool for assessing, addressing, and progressing performance. The big picture is composed of many small parts that can be individually explored and improved to enhance the overall results of your efforts, not unlike souping up your car; BSM components are tested, replaced, upgraded, and tuned to work more efficiently together to achieve the desired results. The "Macro-Micro Connection" views the process like a photo mosaic, wherein many small disparate photos are arranged so that, when viewed from a distance, the overall effect is to create an altogether different image. By tweaking the characteristics of the individual photos, the overall image may be enhanced.

In A Nutshell: Steps in applying the Global-Local-Global Strategy

1. When faced with a performance issue, explore the problem with an eye for the details.
2. Pick a few key specific things to work on, and make some progress.
3. Explore the original performance issue to see what difference your efforts made.
4. As you progress, repeat steps 1-3 until you achieve your performance goal.
5. If unable to identify or resolve the source of the problem yourself, obtain outside assistance.

Happy training!

Jason Erickson is a CST Instructor, Personal Trainer, Yoga Instructor, Nationally Certified Massage Therapist, and AIS Practitioner. He can be contacted at Jason@CSTMinnesota.com; for more information, visit www.CSTMinnesota.com.