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Action Research: Dance Improvisation as Dance Technique

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For several years I have been thinking about dance improvisation as a technique in its own right—that is, as a movement form that depends on the mastery of a particular set of skills that imply and reveal a particular aesthetic. Improvisation eludes easy definition. It is usually included in college programs as a useful choreographic tool, as part of a sequence of choreography or composition courses. My experiences with and passion for improvisation have led me to look at it as a dance form that has an integrity and coherence that is as important to the development of dancers as the more traditional study of modern dance and ballet.

I have studied improvisation since the age of three, beginning with Dalcroze eurythmics, which provided the basis for all my further work in dance. I was introduced to modern dance when I was eight years old and to ballet when I was 12. As I progressed, I thought of my initial improvisational work in eurythmics classes as "baby stuff" compared to the "real" dance technique I studied later. Nevertheless, I was always drawn back to improvisation. When I rediscovered it in California during the 1960s, with A. A. Leath, Anna Halprin, John Graham, and Jani Novack, I felt as if I had returned home.

Yet I was still divided: I thought that one had to choose between being an improvisational dancer or a technical dancer. There was a part of me that believed that if I committed myself to the exploration of improvisational forms, then I would simply be sidestepping the hard work of being a dancer. After all, in most college programs and private studios, improvisational dance, if it was offered at all, was considered an incomplete form, to be studied in the service of more mature dance development or used by dance therapists.

Over time, I have studied and taught many dance techniques and many forms of improvisation. In recent years, my work has been powered by a desire to understand improvisation as a technique, to develop a sequential pedagogy for it, and to grasp its underlying principles. My experiences have given me a clearer understanding of improvisation—of its relationship to other dance forms and its potential to positively influence both dancers and non-dancers.

Preparatory Research

Improvisation. In preparing to write this article, I read from many of the wonderful books available on improvisation, written by Eric Franklin (1996), Alma Hawkins (1991), Daniel Nagrin (1994), Barbara Mettler (1960), Lynn Blom and Tara Chaplin (1988), Joyce Morgenroth (1987), Georgette Schneer (1994), and others. I leafed through back issues of *Contact Quarterly*, where much dialogue on improvisation has been published over the last 15 or 20 years. Yet rather than reiterating the viewpoints of these authors, I decided to write from my own experience with different forms of improvisation: Dalcroze eurythmics, contact improvisation, authentic movement, group dance improvisation, Laban-based studies in improvisation, improvisation as performance, experiential anatomy as applied to improvisation, and so on.

Technique. I found that others had recognized the importance of the relationship between improvisation and formal technique. Wendell Beavers (1993) defines technique as "basically figuring out what works, remembering this, and not starting from zero the next time." In addressing the developments in improvisation of the last 25 years, he says, "All of this work includes learning to work with body feedback and self-observation on the subtle level of sensing, perceiving and doing." Such improvisation calls upon the dancer to reinvestigate the meaning of technique itself: as Beavers argues, "Dance's most neurotic moments historically. . . have come when technique dictates content . . . The idea is not to do without technique but to reinvent it over and over again in whatever way the movement requires." This desire for reinvention is as old as modern dance itself. It restates the kind of investigation that early modern dancers insisted upon for themselves and their followers: if everyone has the potential to dance, then everyone has the potential to develop his or her own forms of dance.

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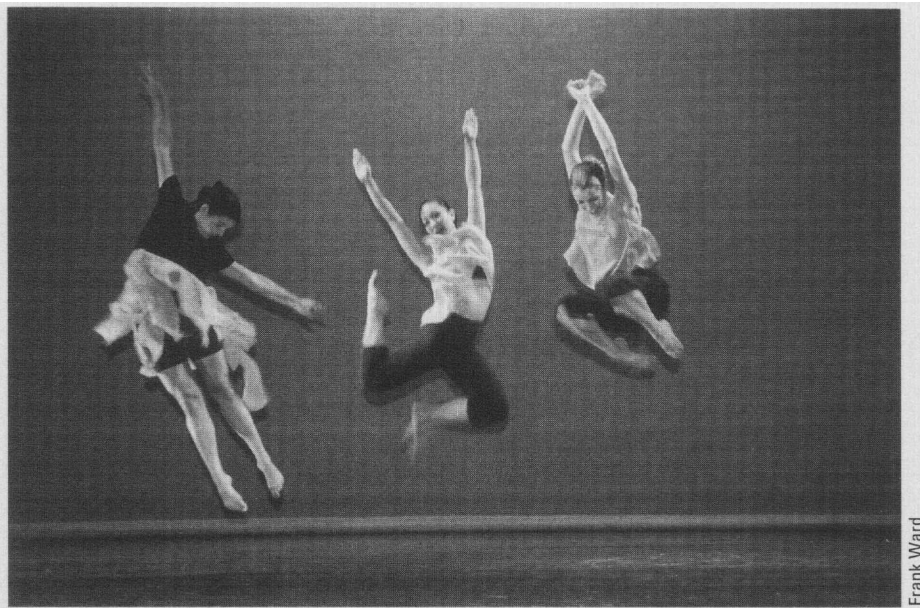
Student Voices. I also listened to what my students had to say. I had a lengthy discussion with six advanced students based on a set of questions I had given them to ponder. These questions included: What are you learning in your improvisation classes? How does the learning occur? Are there skills that can be practiced? Can you monitor your own development? When you feel you are improving, what is it that has improved? What sequences make sense to you and help you develop improvisational skills? What are the goals of improvisation? How does it affect your performance? Does this approach help you to dance well? What does it mean "to dance well"? Has improvisation affected your view of "dancing well"? I also looked through papers written by teaching assistants in response to the rather open-ended question, "What is technique?"

Curriculum. I thought hard about why I sequence courses in the way I do. What is the place of improvisation in a college curriculum? Why is improvisation often viewed simply as material to be included in beginning composition classes? How do we convey to colleagues the possible connections between improvisational training and other dance techniques? What are the principles that underlie various forms of improvisation? Are these principles similar to or completely different from those that underlie training in other technical forms? Are they principles or simply generalizations based on my own personal aesthetic preferences? Are the principles the same if one is teaching improvisation as choreographic sourcing, improvisation for performance, or improvisation as a way of experiencing the moment? If improvisation depends on understanding the creative process, am I implying that the study of the creative process is a technical discipline? Like improvisation itself, the questions seem limitless.

Learning from Experience. For more than 21 years, I have taught all age groups, in many different environments: in a performing arts magnet school for fifth-to-twelfth-graders, in public schools, in a firehouse in Buffalo, in church basements, in gyms, and currently in the Five College Dance Department, which includes diverse programs such as an experimental liberal arts program at Hampshire College and a more traditional B.F.A. program at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. I always seem to begin with the same set of instructions. With rhythmic music as accompaniment, I tell the students, "Take a walk." Then I add variations that introduce movement vocabulary and foster group awareness (e.g., "Change direction," "Follow someone else"). From there, I often proceed to body-part awareness. I introduce simple exercises for leading and following, for activity and passivity, for tension and relaxation, and for spatial and rhythmic awareness.

Many teachers of improvisation are familiar with this basic methodology. Yet through the use of these exercises over many years with many students, I have discovered that improvisation can be approached at both basic and advanced levels, much like tai chi, Graham contractions, and a ballet barre. This approach emphasizes self-discovery: I know what students can learn through any particular sequence, but I also know that I may be surprised at any moment by what they discover about themselves, about movement, and about dance as an art form.

What I am suggesting is that the principles of movement that I teach using a particular improvisational approach are applicable to improvisation in general and to training in more formal dance techniques. These principles can prepare students for cross-disciplinary learning and performance and help them develop body strength, flexibility, rhythmic acuity, spatial awareness, ensemble skills, and anatomical and kinesiological knowledge. In the remainder of this article, I will detail these principles and describe my students' perceptions of the general notion of improvisation-as-technique.



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Principles of Teaching Improvisation

Self-Awareness. Self-awareness in dance involves learning to monitor the proprioceptive information received through movement and through the senses, developing one's kinesthetic sense, and learning kinesiological principles through experience. This kind of awareness is central to certain forms, such as contact improvisation, but it also enhances performance in ballet and modern dance. Self-awareness in improvisation requires the dancer to develop mind-body feedback in order to enhance the flow and synchrony of all movements.

Tension and Relaxation. Tension and

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relaxation are specific modes of self-awareness. All movement, and thus all technique, involves the contraction and release of muscles. Focusing on muscle use, as something separate from training for particular movement sequences, often allows dancers to discover when they are misusing their bodies. Barbara Mettler, a master teacher of improvisation, calls this "instrumental" work.

Activity and Passivity. The psychic reality of activity and passivity as it translates into physical reality affects many aspects of performance. Many dancers know the experience of "being danced," the moments of embodiment when body, mind, spirit, and music all become one. This oneness, I believe, has much to do with the play along the activity-passivity or doing-nondoing spectrum, as well as with the sense of freedom created when one's training and one's ability to release oneself from active application of training merge. This freedom allows the dancer to disappear, in the sense that Stephen Nachmanovitch describes in *Free Play*: "For art to appear, we have to *disappear*. This may sound strange but in fact it is a common experience...It is possible to *become* what you are doing; these times come when pouf!—out you go, and there is only the work" (p. 51). It is during these moments that the image or music or feeling or quality being evoked is most clearly revealed through the dancer—what we now call embodiment.

Leading and Following. Learning to move along the continuum between activity and passivity is important for group improvisation as well. Knowing kinesthetically when to generate and when to receive movement signals a readiness to go to the next step, which is effective leading and following. Leading-and-following exercises prepare dancers for improvisational work of any sort that involves more than one person.

Observation Skills. Both visual and kinesthetic observation are crucial to improvisation. Whether they are performing, rehearsing, attending technique classes, or simply watching others dance, students need good observation skills to answer a variety of questions. Where is movement being initiated? How is the body organized for movement? How is movement resolved? Is there a pattern for developing and shifting movement? Leading and following exercises allow the dancer to practice observational skills at a kinesthetic level, in a sense bypassing the eyes.

Imagery. Finally, I work with imagery, representational or abstract, and how it is generated. For me, it is at the level of imagery that the creative process all comes together. An image might emerge from a movement, or an image may be what initiates a movement. I encourage students to play back and forth between these two ways of using imagery, in the hope that they will learn to identify images that are meaningful to them and embody these images in movement. I want them to give their imaginations free rein as they watch each other dance and respond to each other's movements.

These, for me, are the basic materials of most any form of improvisational dance teaching. Another key principle is, of course, helping dancers expand their range of movement responses. While I foster this growth in part by introducing the elements of dance from a Laban-based perspective, teaching Laban Movement Analysis itself is not my goal.

Student Perceptions of Improvisation

The "Improv" Company. As described earlier, I recently gathered six students together for a formal discussion of improvisational dance. I had worked very closely with four of them for three years, while one was newer to my classes, and the sixth had worked intensively on improvisation with colleagues of mine and asked to be included in the discussion. They were part of an "improv" company that they had started as part of the student dance company at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. This improv company met twice weekly for two hours, and performed several times in formal and informal settings. A faculty member danced with them regularly, but the group was student-directed. I had taught most of these students in beginning comp (an improv class) and advanced comp. Two of them had taken a course with me at Hampshire College entitled "Techniques of Improvisation." I had met with two others about a half dozen times to improvise and work with imagery in dance. Most of them had continued to seek my advice and guidance even when no longer formally studying with me. Our work together deepened their understanding of embodiment and of their own creativity.

Balanced Awareness. When we met for our discussion, the students had much to say. Like so many modern dancers, they loved talking about the processes of dancing and the development of style and form. In response to questions about skill, they felt that awareness was crucial to its development and that improvisational work enabled them to find a balance between internal and external awareness. One student described internal awareness as learning "what makes you tick as a mover so that you can work with others." They felt that they had learned to balance this awareness with the external visualization of space and imagery in different forms. One student commented that acting as a performance skill had taken on a new meaning for her. She now understood that it involved a different sort of awareness: that acting was "doing" rather than "pretending." They all agreed that improvisation helped in "getting past one's brain," "remaining vulnerable in the moment," "learning to trust oneself, one's senses, and each other," and "going into the unknown." They felt it was very important that they had experienced dance as a process, as an ongoing act of creation.

Dancer as Creator. Improvisational work also helped them see that the student can create the movement. This led them to view technique and traditional dance in a completely new way. By performing leading-and-following

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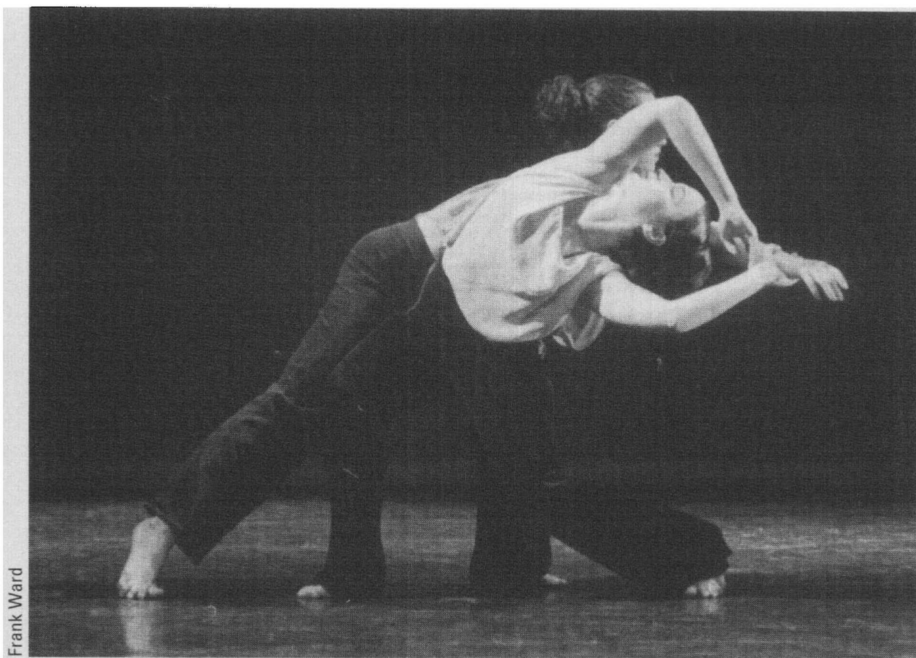
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exercises in improvisation classes, they found ways of making movement in technique classes their own. They had more awareness of movement itself and of other dancers. One student commented, "I see other dancers now as people as well as dancers. Improvisation has to do with the spirit." They observed dance differently and were quicker to identify quality, style, attack, initiation, and motivation. Most important, they had learned that it is in these improvisational processes that true "creation occurs."

Structure and Form. When they were first creating the improv company, the students felt that they needed a certain amount of structure. As they became a performance group, they had to decide where their focus would be. On contact improvisation? Voice? Text? Props? What tools would they need for each? They settled on being a "movement-based improv group" and grappled with identifying which skills they would need to perform well. They decided that leading and following and working in duets were the most basic activities that they would need to practice. They would need to develop structures for performance and work with organic movement form. They would also have to learn how to develop material during performance, how to sense what needs to come next, when to develop a theme, and when to drop it. They spent a lot of time practicing the evolution of one movement into another. They kept practicing being simple, quieting the inner judges, reaffirming for themselves and one another that creativity is within the self and life is the source, so that they would not "have to pull it in from the air."

Performance. As for performance itself, the students felt that improvisation had helped them learn that they could make choices in set choreography. They could still make discoveries in structured performance and find ways to keep it alive by allowing the self to be in it—"out of the brain and in the moment." As one said, "Being in the moment has become a tool, not a goal." Improv training helped them tune into the nuances of movement dynamics, musical phrasing, ensemble work, and many other aspects of performance. Their views of dance itself and of their relationship to their own performances had undergone significant changes as a result of improv work. Witness the following statements: "[Improv work] trained me to enjoy dance more, to let go of the fear of making errors." "I don't worry anymore about messing up, don't get upset after performance if I made a mistake. A choreographer needs to grant that freedom." "Not worrying about counts has brought me to a new level, a new way of fulfilling the dance." "Dance [used to be] an escape from reality. At the end of the dance I felt blank. Where was I? Now I feel physically present throughout the performance." "I used to think of dance as the organization of steps and how they look and positions. Now I think of it as movement through space. Music and space are connectors. I get through the steps to something new."

Teaching. The manner in which improvisation is taught affects how students ultimately perceive it. The teacher of improvisation needs to know when to assert a personal viewpoint and when to back off, when to push for risk-taking and when to accept the need for groundedness. My students described successful teaching as that which allows them to discover principles of movement without overwhelming them with information (i.e., "giving the right amount of information at the right time"). They also felt that a good improv teacher needs to be passionately immersed in the material, and should be able to give them a wide range of imagery and a "safe" work environment, where they have permission to take risks. Trust was very important to them—trust in themselves, in each other, in their teacher, and in the creative process itself.

A Technique for Life. All in all, the students had begun to see improvisation as a technique for life, as a source of information for living, and technique itself as an evolving process rather than a set of goals. They spoke of "dancing well" as "dancing fully," as "integration" of the self, the environment, other dancers, movement concepts, and so forth. They had let go of competition with others in order to see what they could learn. In other words, they had learned how to learn, whether in the dance studio or in life itself.

The Self-Reflective Teacher

In her teacher-training courses, Barbara Mettler said, "Always know where

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you are with your material." That statement felt both very right and very challenging when I first heard it. The challenge is that the more I learn, the more it seems there is to learn about this endless process of connecting creativity with discipline in bodily form. My teaching of improvisation sometimes strikes me as utterly basic, as so simple that anyone could do it. At other times it seems so vast and so complex an endeavor that I wonder who I am to think that I can get anywhere near the heart of it.

The fact is, improvisation is by its very nature both basic and advanced. I think of cycles and spirals, and of how we sometimes ascend to a new level of performance and understanding and sometimes swoop back down to the beginning again. I always marvel at the way in which advanced dancers can concentrate so intently on the simplest movement themes, at the pleasure they can take in finding depth within the basics. And I also delight at the inventiveness, exuberance, and freshness that non-dancers bring to the same material, with movement that is unencumbered by any dance cliches.

Many dance programs now include various forms of improvisation as part of their curricula. But it is still often viewed as secondary to the "real" techniques. I look forward to a time when improvisation is acknowledged as more than a preparation for choreography. It is a way of dancing that has its own principles, logic, and forms, and it can enhance work in other classes and on the performance stage. Even more important, a commitment to improvisational work can lead to personal growth that extends far beyond the dance studio.

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