



IMPROVISATION: WHAT DO I DO AND WHY DO I DO IT?

Sally Doughty, Senior Lecturer in dance at De Montfort University, reveals her research into widening the skills and vocabulary of dance students in improvisation classes

Improvisation is central to much contemporary dance making, both as a way of generating movement material in rehearsal and as a performance mode. Although it is widely used, improvisation is generally considered to be an ephemeral act, and by that I mean that it is difficult to capture or to pin down. There's a tendency for improvisers to rely on 'feelings' or 'intuition' to shape their improvisations. How often have we heard that 'my body just does what it wants' or, 'I start dancing and it just happens'. Well I don't think it does! I believe there is much more to the improvisational act than people recognise.

I am very interested in improvisational practices in my work as an independent dance artist and as an educator. In order to understand improvisation as a more tangible form, I have been running a research project to investigate the development of critical and reflective skills in students engaged in movement improvisation. It aims to encourage students to develop greater self-awareness in their practice, allowing them to make more informed choices about their spontaneous creative decision-making processes when improvising in order to identify habitual movement patterns and develop their movement vocabulary.

Although my research was focused on a group of undergraduate students, it's clear that this approach would also be of benefit to professional dance practitioners and educators who are interested in developing their improvisation practices, knowledge and movement content.

In order to develop students' critical awareness of their practice, I encouraged them to verbally report on what they were doing at any moment whilst improvising. These verbal reports were recorded on MP3 players and their physical improvisations were captured on camcorders, both of which provided an archive of their improvisations and verbal reports.

I used two significant resources that provided me with a framework for the project. I used an approach of 'think aloud reports' (Perkins, 1981: 49), which was designed in order to get participants to express their thoughts during the process of engagement with a task. In order to develop the students' ability to improvise and talk simultaneously, I drew upon Perkins' six principles which are:

Say whatever's on your mind. Don't hold back hunches, wild guesses, wild ideas, images, intentions

Speak as continuously as possible. Say something at least once every five seconds,

even if only, 'I'm drawing a blank'

Speak audibly. Watch out for your voice dropping, as you become involved

Speak as telegraphically as you please, don't worry about complete sentences as eloquence

Don't over explain or justify. Analyse no more than you would normally

Don't elaborate past events. Get into the pattern of saying what you're thinking now, not of thinking for a while then describing your thoughts.

I also used a methodology developed by American scholar and dance artist, Kent De Spain. De Spain has developed a model for the documentation and analysis of the theory and practice of movement improvisation, which uses recordings of spoken commentaries about experiences and creative decisions made by the improviser whilst moving (De Spain, 2003: 28). These verbal reports are then analysed by De Spain to determine, for example, the range of determinants that could feasibly be drawn upon to inform an improvisation. He writes that his model deals with how to 'access improvisational experiences right as they are happening' (2003: 28) in order for the improviser to become more adept at recognising and understanding decisions that are made in any one moment of an improvisation. De >

FINAL YEAR
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UNIVERSITY
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36

Spain's determinants include movement; effort; environment; imagination; cognitive skills; memory and association (1997:143). So, for example, if an improviser is aware that there are shadows being cast on the studio floor, that could relate to a range of determinants including environment, memory or imagination and may be used to inform the development of the improvisation accordingly. These determinants aren't mutually exclusive; more than one could be accessed and referred to at any one time. The crux of my project however is being able to recognise which one(s) you are responding in order to use it as information in an improvisation.

Project detail

My project was embedded into an improvisation class for third year undergraduate dance students. We started very simply with tasks that encouraged the students to comment verbally on what they actually saw when they were dancing, for example; window, Sarah's top, bags, the floor, light switches. Having got to grips with the idea of noticing, moving and talking whilst improvising, tasks progressed which encouraged students to verbally report on what they saw about themselves when dancing, and what informed them to, for example, run, drop to the floor or extend a leg. It was interesting to note that with tasks of this nature, students spoke much more quietly than in the previous tasks that had asked them to comment on external factors. Referring to Perkins' principle which

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recommends 'speak[ing] audibly. Watch out for your voice dropping as you become involved', it's evident that the students became more introspective when engaging in these kinds of tasks, with the quality of the voice following suit. To alleviate this we spent a fair amount of time just dealing with maintaining a clear, audible level of sound whilst talking and moving. Students also expressed that, over and above the voice becoming softer, they had concerns about saying the wrong thing out loud, of being judged or of not demonstrating the relationship between their verbal report and physical action. A challenge therefore was to develop skills in the students whereby they were able to move away from being self-conscious and judging their verbal report. We worked in duets and small groups a great deal in order to achieve this, with the dancer reporting verbally on what they were doing and seeing in the moment, and also the observers reporting on the dancer. Once the students were relatively familiar with verbally reporting whilst dancing, I introduced a range of technology to record their work.

Students wore personal MP3 players in armbands whilst improvising which recorded their verbal reports, and mini dv camcorders captured their physical activity. Students viewed their recordings, transcribed their verbal reports and undertook guided reflective writings in order to establish, for example, the nature of decisions made about movement content, structure, habitual movement patterns and the range of determinants they used. Students engaged in a number of such recordings throughout the project providing a dynamic document of their work.

Discussion was integral to the work as it engendered a sharing of experiences between students (again, helping them to

get over their self consciousness), as well as allowing me to gauge how they were doing with the work and developing some tasks in response to their feedback. For example, in one session students noted that it was difficult to find the right words to articulate what they were doing.

I reiterated Perkins' fourth principle; 'speak as telegraphically as you please, don't worry about complete sentences as eloquence'. I also encouraged students to use sounds instead of words to make comment on the type and quality of movement which further informed the development of their improvisations.

Things seemed to be going well, feedback was positive and I noted a development in the integrity and maturity of decisions made and resulting movement content. Then there came a session in which the students raised concerns such as 'the more we know and the more choices we have to respond to, the harder it is to dance. It feels like we're not dancing anymore'. This was a real revelation to me. The more they became aware of their decision making processes, the more their ability to 'dance' was affected, they thought, detrimentally, and because their dancing didn't feel or look like it used to then that must somehow be wrong. However, my analysis of this is that they were relying less on habitual movement



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patterns and ways of dancing and were working instead with less familiar concepts and content. Their thought processes were shifting and therefore their physical responses were too. It's interesting to note here that when habitual movement patterns ceased to come into play, it was as if the rug had been pulled from under the students' feet; they had fewer reference points for their work. For me as dance maker and improviser, this is a really fascinating place to be and I was excited that the students had got to this stage. They were, however, less thrilled! This revelation happened quite late on in the term, so time to develop these findings was limited. Running a similar project again, I would very much like to reach this position earlier so we could develop the work in response to this.

At the end of the project the students expressed that they had found it very useful to engage in. They now acknowledge and understand some of the complex processes involved in movement improvisation and have gone some way to developing their vocabulary in response. They expressed surprise at the degree of mindfulness and attention that is required to create conscious and well thought out improvisations. They reported that wearing the MP3 players in armbands useful but distracting at times, as they tended to

either keep the arm still or lift the arm to talk in to it. They became hyper-aware of the arm in question which impacted on the movement but I encouraged them to use it as information to inform their work. The videos proved to be more useful, and as one student wrote:

'The use of video was great. It allowed me to see what thought processes we took and where that led. It also allowed us to identify regular patterns; for example, habitual movement, (safety movements), the length of time we spend on one idea and it also allowed us to re-evaluate our own perceptions of how we believe we improvise.' (Sutton, L. 2006)

The skill of verbally reporting on action proved to be difficult for some students, as one writes: 'I prefer dancing without talking – I got stuck for ideas as I was concentrating on what I was saying more' (May, S. 2006).

My initial proposal when starting this project last summer was to develop skills in articulating the spontaneous decision making processes involved in improvisation. It strikes me that this is an incredibly difficult act to engage in. What actually happened is that students described the activity that they were involved in at any moment, rather than the decision taken to get there; that takes split-second timing. However, what has

emerged from this research is that improvisers can develop the skill to recognise where they are at any one moment and make choices about what they will choose to work with further to inform the next moment.

I believe that this approach to developing strategies for furthering improvisational practices is very valuable. Professional artists, educators and students wanting to gain greater understanding and control of their creative decision making processes whilst improvising would find this beneficial in their development.

Sally Doughty is Senior Lecturer Dance, De Montfort University, Leicester and an Independent Dance Artist and can be contacted on sdoughty@dmu.ac.uk

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