

Improvisational Movement Practice: A Model for Collaborative Processes

Distinction Thesis for BFA in Dance by Laura Patterson

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Description of the research:

My research explored the impact of movement improvisation on collaborative group projects and processes. I sought to discover how an improvisational movement practice impacts the group dynamic and energy, the relationship between the participants, and the daily lives of the individual participants outside of the project. I asked: If a group engages in a regularly scheduled improvisational practice, will the tools and mindsets instilled by improvisation aid in a shift from product-oriented work to process-oriented work and collaboration? Does this change engender a lower-stress environment? Does this change engender a higher satisfaction level?

Drawing from my own experience improvising in groups over the past four years at The Ohio State University, I predicted that participants in regularly scheduled movement improvisation sessions would develop: attention to detail, detachment from a desire of a final, polished product, a collective consciousness, adherence to the present moment, heightened sensitivity, strengthened decision making and agency, and an understanding of self, relationships, patterns, and habits. Lisa Nelson, an American dance-maker, improviser, videographer, and collaborative artist, defines improvisation as “the discipline of observation and the art of memory” (qtd. in De Spain 48). Improvisation requires rigorous internal and external observation, because the movement generation stems from responding to the body’s natural impulses as well as the shapes, smells, sounds, and textures of the environment one is inhabiting. Improvisation also requires the art of memory, because the dancer is constantly tracking his or her movement in space and coordinating with other dancers to make intentional and artful decisions that often repeat or cycle. This requires a large amount of presence and concentration, which are two things often absent in our daily routines that move from end goal to end goal.

With this information in mind, I hypothesized that regular improvisational practice will lead a group to remain process-oriented rather than product-focused throughout a project's duration. Through an improvisational movement practice, the group would cultivate an ability to be mindful and focused on the "now."

I explored my hypotheses with three groups of people: Danish and American students studying at Gerlev Idrætshøjskole in Denmark, OSU medical students, and OSU undergraduate dance majors. To begin my research, I led movement improvisation classes on an OSU study abroad trip in summer 2019, *Dance Denmark*. I offered a combined course for both Danish students at Gerlev idrætshøjskole and American students from OSU. This class allowed me to begin practicing my teaching styles and methods on a group of dancers and non-dancers alike.

Following my work in Denmark, I created a regularly scheduled movement improvisation course for a group of OSU medical students. In this portion of my research I asked: How will the skills acquired from a movement improvisation course influence the present mindfulness of medical students and impact their future doctor-patient interactions as medical professionals? The group of medical students met once a week for one hour over six weeks to improvise together in the fall of 2019. The lesson plan shifted every week, because I wanted to share a large breadth of prompts and improvisational scores in the hope that one or two prompts would resonate with each student. However, the class structure remained relatively stable.

Each class began with individual movement prompts to help the students connect with their own bodies and inner impulses. Following the individual warmup, I offered small group improvisational prompts, so the students could begin sensing and moving as a small unit. Some of these prompts included flocking, where the group moves as one unit mimicking a flock of

birds, and catching, where one person introduces a specific way of moving and the rest of the group tries to catch the sensation or theme of the movement. The last half of the class involved a longer, full group improvisation session, known as a “jam.” Each jam included twenty minutes of non-stop moving and non-verbal group decision making. After each class, I took notes on shifts in the students’ creative choices and comfort levels as well as on the relationships between the group members. At the end of the six weeks, I offered participants an anonymous survey to provide feedback from the students’ point of view.

Lastly, I embarked on a creative process that incorporated movement improvisation with a group of five OSU undergraduate dance majors. The group of dance majors met once a week from September 15th, 2019 to February 22nd, 2020. For this section of my research I asked: How does incorporating a regular group improvisation session into a dance rehearsal process shift the group dynamic, influence the process itself, and shape the focus of the dancers within the final product? For the first half of the rehearsals, we travelled to different locations around Columbus and the dancers improvised in each location. After each improvisational session, the dancers and I noted our sensory experiences by recording images, colors, words, or phrases in personal journals.

For the second half of the rehearsals, the dancers began with a short improvisational session to continue the connectivity we developed over the first six weeks. Following this session, I created set choreography based on the journal notes from each prior rehearsal. I asked the dancers to recall their notes and experiences from the site-specific improvisational sessions while performing in order to keep the process present within the work. Similar to my process

with the medical students, I provided the dancers with an anonymous survey at the end of the project that asked them to describe their experiences.

After completing my work with all three of the above groups, I synthesized my research findings through a careful analysis of my personal notes alongside the individual feedback from the participants in both the medical student cohort and the dance cohort.

Critical Analysis:

During my research in Denmark, I observed striking shifts in the relationships within the group throughout the course of the movement improvisation class. As the class progressed, the students made braver and more decisive choices, started to create as a group rather than as individuals, and began to bond physically outside the constraints of a language barrier. I also noted that the interactions between the two communities, Danish and American students, permanently shifted throughout the rest of our time in Denmark. After the class, the dancers from both communities appeared more comfortable with one another and had more casual discussion outside of the classroom.

During a verbal feedback session following the class, both the Gerlev and OSU students informed me that they enjoyed the section of class with the least amount of instruction. They were referring to the open improvisation “jam” I provided in the last twenty minutes of our time together. They appreciated the time and space to truly see and hear one another without being too caught up in a task. At Gerlev Idrætshøjskole, the Danish dance students have a strictly ordered schedule, and they attend classes focused on learning combinations and mastering detailed choreography that is mainly found in street styles such as hip hop and house dance. Because of this, I found it compelling that many of the Danish students appreciated the improvisational

movement class for its limited instruction and expansive space and time to explore their bodies and the environment. Tania Isaac, a Philadelphia-based dance artist, writes a lot about the freedom that can be unearthed through a regular improvisational practice. She states, “We crave the freedom to move in any form, idiom, culture, location, and marry it with the conscious ideas of how dance/movement/art/thought shapes who we are, where we exist, and how we negotiate that interaction” (Isaac 1). In Denmark, we danced with one another to learn about each other’s cultures and to discover commonalities between our ways of existing in the world. A movement improvisation class served as an ideal platform for this exchange of embodied knowledge and history because of the freedom of expression it facilitated.

My work with the OSU medical students in fall 2019 reinforced some of the discoveries I unearthed in Denmark. By the second class, it was evident that a shared movement language and relationship between the participants had been established. Every participant brought their individualized style into the room, whether or not they had previous dance training. After the third class, I asked them to share something they had already gained mentally from their improvisation practice. Medical student #1 explained that they gained the tool of paying attention to a lot of people without tracking and mimicking their every move. Medical student #2 stated that, with each class, they cared less and less about what they looked like and who was watching. I found this extremely exciting, because after only three weeks, the students identified two useful practices that are often a struggle for trained dancers.

However, the individual survey responses carried the most exciting results from this phase of my research. The students’ responses supported my personal observations of the class as well as my prior individual research. Every student who completed the survey stated that they

felt more mindful after having improvised in a group. Additionally, they explained that they found themselves focusing more on the process than the product because of the way their minds were engaged during the class. Medical student #3 explained, “I find myself focusing more on the process...through this improv we have allowed ourselves to create through movement, with no end in mind.” When I asked what skills they believe they gained through the course, the students responded with descriptions such as mindfulness, awareness, consciousness, confidence, and openness of body and mind. Medical student #2 stated, “I have become more in tune with my feelings/body/emotion that will help me to be an emotionally intelligent doctor in the future.” Our work with improvisation increased the students’ body-level intelligence, their ability to read body language, and their spatial awareness. All of these attributes will help their people skills as they fill their roles as medical professionals. A study at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine provided medical students with acting improv classes to improve their communication skills. The improv workshops developed the following skills in the medical students: communication, trust, active listening, and comfort and amiability in the cohort (Del Vecchio S35). These skills are similar to the skills the medical students reported gaining during my course, revealing that different forms of improvisation can generate similar skillsets. However, the dance improvisation allowed the medical students to, first, deeply explore their own bodies and, second, improvise and explore in a group. This time for individual exploration gave the students the confidence to make bold and impulsive decisions once they started moving in a group setting. In contrast, the drama improvisation all took place in group settings, lacking that time for individual discovery.

My survey also asked the participants how they problem solved during the course and if the dance improvisation practices transferred into their everyday problem solving. Medical student #3 responded, “It did teach me to focus less on the problem and allow myself to fail in the process of finding a solution.” Medical student #1 wrote, “In daily life, I usually mimic/copy others so I look like I know what I am doing.” However, both students explained that they problem solved within my course by going with the flow and allowing other people’s choices to inspire their own choices, rather than simply mimicking. The last question on the survey asked if the students thought medical professionals or professionals in all fields could benefit from an improvisation practice. All students surveyed said yes and emphasized the importance of a creative outlet, particularly one that incorporates the mind and body equally. There are many articles in medical journals discussing the idea of patient-centeredness, an approach to treatment where providers treat patients not only from a clinical perspective, but also from an emotional, mental, spiritual, social, and financial perspective (Catalyst, NEJM 1). The article “Help, I’m Losing Patient-centeredness! Experiences of Medical Students and their Teachers” suggests that communication skills, ability to deal with emotions and personal suffering, self-awareness, and self-care are all personal developments that support patient-centeredness (Bombeke 662). The results from both my study and the study at Johns Hopkins Medical School show that various forms of improvisation can improve some of these personal developments necessary for providing patient-centered care. Therefore, a regularly scheduled improvisation course for students in medical school would be beneficial for their growth as healthcare professionals.

My work with the OSU dance students was the most challenging, due to the nature of the project. For this section of my research, I made a final product that would be presented in a

concert setting. Therefore, a product-based mindset was hard to avoid. It was difficult to resist the search for perfection. However, I kept the words of Barbara Dilley, a dance improvisation pioneer, in the forefront of my mind: “Do not get so concerned with creating magic moments that you miss the moments of magic” (qtd. in De Spain 84). Maintaining a consistent improvisational component in each rehearsal proved essential to keeping the work present and process-oriented.

The final product, “The Playdate Vignettes,” opened with a video I crafted from rehearsal footage of our site-specific improvisations in fall 2019 (<https://vimeo.com/409024009>). Tania Isaac’s work inspired my decision to show these visual traces of our rehearsal process. Although a lot of Isaac’s works bring the audience into her process, I experienced this artistic choice through her open-notebook series. She describes her open-notebook series as “a research process that follows ideas from inception to realization” (Isaac 1). I, too, wanted a product that displayed the rehearsal process from “inception to realization.” After the film, the dancers performed a live piece in Sullivant Hall’s High Street rotunda (<https://vimeo.com/409010083>). The rotunda is a large and round entry to the building, and it is open through the building’s three stories. This non-traditional performance space allowed the audience to view the piece from above. Although the choreography was set, I encouraged the dancers to circle back towards the root of the piece—the sensations and feelings from our site-specific movement improvisation sessions. By viewing our creative process in the film directly before watching the final “product,” the audience received the work in its fullest form.

After our project ended, the OSU dancers also received individual surveys with the same questions I asked the medical students at the close of their sessions. The dancers confirmed that they found themselves tracking the progress of the process throughout rehearsal rather than

envisioning the final product. Dance student #1 stated, "...because the product came together rather effortlessly, I can appreciate the rehearsals and experiences that led us to this product."

The dancers also listed some skills they attained throughout the duration of the project: kinetic listening, cooperation with dancers, spending time on one idea for an extended period of time, openness, new methodologies to choreograph, spontaneous composition, lack of preciousness, ability to build off one simple idea, and ability to play in a body that is exhausted. I believe that these acquired skills allowed the dance to remain malleable, playful, and process-driven, creating an organic and spirited work.

Summary of the results:

From my research in Denmark, I concluded that dance improvisation can facilitate a bonding experience between communities. In a traditional dance class, the participants' attention typically remains on one individual—the instructor of the class—but in a movement improvisation class, the participants' attention is split evenly between themselves, one another, and their environment. The freedom of form allowed participants to explore their bodies, try different ways of moving by mimicking or sampling from others, and oscillate between the two at any moment. This allowed the participants to get to know themselves while simultaneously learning about one another through a creative and energizing nonverbal experience.

Throughout my research with the medical students, they shared many insights on what they gained from the course and what they would be able to apply outside of class. One of the main takeaways the medical students learned is that there are many different ways to be right. Additionally, failure does not always lend negative consequences, and sometimes it leads to new paths to solving a problem. The movement improvisation course helped the medical students

shed judgement towards themselves and those around them. In addition to mindfulness, the cohort found that movement improvisation provided them with increased awareness, confidence, and emotional agility. These attributes are essential to medical professionals for upholding patient-centeredness.

During my research with the dance students, we crafted a final performance that celebrated the creative process and maintained a consistent improvisational component from the first rehearsal. As the through-line of the process from inception to realization, improvisation provided the dancers with a strong bond, kinetic listening, spontaneity, and lack of preciousness or perfectionism. These skills, nourished by the regular improvisational practice, allowed the performance to remain a living and breathing dynamic summary of our process.

Implication for future goals /relationship to the field:

I have been a mover, maker, and investigator since I took my first dance class. Since then, I have viewed movement as a cognitive, emotional, and physical practice. Although my dance career began with a formal dance practice characterized by codified classes and techniques, I became interested in freer forms of expression, rooted in improvisation, when I began studying dance on a collegiate level. Over the past few years, I questioned traditional ideas of dance and explored the influence movement can hold on individuals and groups. As part of my BFA in Dance at The Ohio State University, I researched the role improvisation can play in physical and mental health, communication skills, and community building and resiliency. I hope this research will aid in my pursuit of a professional educational career where I can develop creative methods of engaging people in movement and encouraging both individual and community resiliency and imagination.

After leaving The Ohio State University, I am pursuing a professional performance, teaching, and choreographic career in the dance field. Over the past year, this Distinction project informed each of these future roles. The literature I read in preparation for this project, including *Landscape of the Now: A Topography of Movement Improvisation* by Kent De Spain, informed my personal movement practice. It reminded me to reconnect with my sensations and present experiences, particularly in performances. My own improvisational practice also improved during the process of breaking improvisation down to teach both dancers and non-dancers. I reconnected with the improvisational games and prompts I provided my students as I participated in or observed them. The clarity this process gave me enhanced my performance quality.

My teaching skillset grew immensely with each community involved in my project. After each class, I took note of what worked, what could work, and what didn't work. These conclusions varied with the members of community I was teaching and the overall teaching environment. I learned to read the room and shift plans as needed. For example, while teaching the medical students I learned that it worked when I moved with the students as part of the class rather than teaching in a removed position from the students. However, while working with the dance students, I learned that it worked when I was not part of the improvisational sessions, because I would not be performing with the dancers in the final performance. Teaching both dancers and non-dancers in a wide breadth of locations, I gained the ability to adapt and shift class plans as needed.

Lastly, this project informed my choreographic process and challenged my traditional methods of making. Similar to my teaching experiences, I learned to work with who I had in the room. Through this project, it became clear to me that no matter what the choreography was, if

the dancers were in tune with themselves and with one another, it would be an engaging and exciting piece. It also became evident that our sense of community and ritual would be lost if we did not continue to engage with the our improvisational practice. As I create dances as a professional artist, I will uphold the notions of consistency, ritual, and play in my work.

Aside from developing my own professional career, the insights collected from this research can be used by anyone working with groups or communities. The research shows that an improvisational practice can improve relationships between members of a community, strengthen individual mindfulness and sensitivity, and keep a project centered on the process rather than the end goal. This knowledge can be applied across multiple fields such as social work, community engagement, organizational leadership, and health and wellness. In the future, I plan on remaining an advocate for the incorporation of movement and improvisation into these fields.

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