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Dancing and talking

exploring the value of talk within dance improvisation

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Dancing and Talking: Exploring the Value of Talk within Dance Improvisation Practice

By

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Master of Arts by Research

September 2011



**The work contained within this document has been submitted
by the student in partial fulfilment of the requirement of their course and award**

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within Dance Improvisation Practice**

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Abstract

This study is an exploration of dance improvisation practice and in particular it recognizes and investigates opportunities for reflective talk that naturally occurs within the practice. The study examines the way dancers' strategies, shared narratives and talk embody the philosophy of the moving body that underpins improvisation as a contemporary dance practice. The study focuses closely on what dancers say about their dance and how it feeds into the movement itself. By exploring the interrelationship between spoken and embodied knowledges, the study sheds light on the improvisation process and suggests new ways of explaining the knowledge that resides within dance improvisation in Western culture. By using an ethnographic approach, the research explores how improvisation is practiced within a learning environment of pre-professional dancers and in a context of practicing dance artists. The study reveals that there is an oral culture of talk rituals which is practiced within both the learning and professional environment of dance improvisation. It shows that an important aspect of the knowledge that is generated through dance improvisation is transmitted via talk and passed on through this oral culture, which not only augments the passing on and 'picking up' of a collection of embodied skills and methods but is also fundamental in helping to determine what constitutes the core characteristics of dance improvisation.

Chapter One - Introduction

1.1 The aim of the study

The aim of this study is to explore how the relationship between movements and words give rise to particular characteristics of contemporary improvisation as a movement practice in the 21st century. The interest in particular is in what dancers say about their own dance and how it feeds into the movement itself. By exploring naturally occurring reflective talk in the practice that specifically happens before, after and around the dance rather than within it, this study hopes to shed light on the improvisational strategies and to suggest new ways of illuminating the knowledge that resides within dance improvisation in the Western culture.

1.2 The territory of the study

In music, drama and dance, improvisation is widely recognized as a process of revealing the world that is around and within the artist, by actions which are immediate and done within a discipline of awareness. In dance, improvisation is mainly used in two ways. One use is as a choreographic tool, either to generate material that will later be set, or as a direct performance, where performers are seen as they make decisions and act upon them in real time.¹ The second use is as a professional and personal development tool, where practitioners are mainly motivated to obtain and sustain improvisational skills as a mode of dancing. Learning improvisation alongside other dance skills is part of the dance curriculum in numerous dance-training colleges and universities across the world. This study is situated in the

¹ Katie Duck's *Magpie Music Dance* is an example of improvised performance group <http://kateduck.com/magpie%20umbrella/>

second usage, and focuses on the practice of dance improvisation as an end in itself within learning environments.

1.3 The background that prompted the research

My research on improvisation began with my own experience as a dancer and teacher and while writing this thesis it developed from a practical investigation into a more theoretical one. But since this research is based on embodied knowledge as much as it is on other kinds of knowledge, it seems that my own body-based research began long before my MA studies.

Watching and performing improvised work and teaching, and participating in classes and workshops² inspired me to start a local improvisational group in the West Midlands, UK. Over time, I became interested in researching this group's work, as I was curious to define what it is we were doing and wanted to make sense of my understanding of it. Having practiced improvisation for a long time, it became clear that my curiosity developed into seeing how the activity of this group might have the potential for revealing what is unique about dance improvisation practice. The group I started in February 2009 with the intention of practicing improvisation became also the fieldwork for my research. In order to broaden my 'field research', I chose to study a second group; this time of university dance students. Although both groups focus on dance improvisation as a core activity, the groups contrast each other in several aspects. On skill level, one group is of established and experienced practitioners and the other is a group of pre-professional dance students. In terms of

² Between 2000 and 2011, some of the live performances I have watched and the workshops I have taken part in were by Pauline De Groot, Julian Hamilton, Katie Duck, Eva Karczag, Miranda Tufnell and Helen Poynor.

the organizing structure, the students pay their fees, and are led by a teacher whereas the experienced group is mostly an activity free of charge and is organized and led by the artists themselves. On a socio-cultural level, one group participates in a teaching setting while the other group is a professional learning community.³

Having the benefit of my involvement in dance improvisation, it became clear that I was most interested in understanding the significance that is attached to the practice and in particular how talk contributes to this significance. I was intrigued to see how improvisation as a social action generates meaning, how dancers' strategies, talk and shared narratives embody the philosophy of the moving body that underpins improvisation, and how the practice has the potential to reveal its own structural properties.

1.4 Thesis structure

Chapter two provides a contextual overview of dance improvisation by exploring the work of others that is pertinent to this study. By examining the use of 'talk' in a broader dance context, it locates the focus of this study and clarifies the interest in naturally occurring talk activities within improvisation training and practice. Chapter three sets out the methodology for this research, dealing with the challenges and opportunities provided by researching a participatory activity. The next two chapters then provide an analysis of the activities of two groups of dancers practicing improvisation; pre-professionals and experienced artists. My interest is in the movement, but for the purposes of this study I am focusing specifically on the words and talking that takes place. It is through this focus that the study will seek to

³ Both case studies went through an ethical approval process. A sample of the informed consent form is attached as an appendix.

argue that there is an important connection between dance and talk in a dance improvisation context. Further, the study will aim to unfold some of the cultural values and physical principles that give rise to the practice.

Chapter Two – A Contextual Framework for Talk Practice in Dance Improvisation

This chapter will explore the broader context for considering the role of talk actions within dance improvisation. It will start by discussing ideas of form and structure in dance improvisation, examining the practice's content and the concepts that influence the practice. The chapter will continue by examining talk activities in different dance contexts such as in the teaching studio environment and performance. By doing so it will situate this study's focus on specific talk activities located within specific approaches to dance improvisation.

2.1 Examining ways in which dance improvisation practice is structured

In the process of contextualizing dance improvisation this study has tracked the way the activity has developed over many years. My research has revealed that dance improvisation did not enter historical writings on dance until the middle of the 20th century, as it has been mentioned and experienced as a unique practice only since the late 1960s. Up until then, developments in Modern Dance⁴ and improvisation were woven together in the literature. The knowledge about dance improvisation expanded in the late 1970s with the creation of the pioneering journals *New Dance* in the UK and *Contact Quarterly* in the US. Observations and descriptions by central figures in the development of improvisation practice provided important contributions to the literature. Through these writings, dance improvisation practitioners seemed to be looking to find form and structure in order to both validate the practice and to develop

⁴ I use the term Modern Dance to refer to the dance that emerged in the early part of the 20th century as a resistance to the dominant Western Theatre form, which was Classical Ballet.

their expertise. For example, Nancy Stark Smith, who went on to establish herself as a key figure in Contact Improvisation⁵, reflected on the work of The Grand Union improvisation collective in the 1960s:

I learned that there was, in practice, no inherent hierarchy of material. Every move had equal potential to unify, clarify, destroy or transform what was going on.

(Smith 1987)

When examining the published literature that documents the practice, it seems that it has been largely written by those practicing from within the form, rather than written by those – such as historians and scholars from other disciplines – looking in from the outside. For example, dance improvisation practitioner Katherine Ferrier (2011) writes about inner structure and patience in improvisational processes with a focus on her collaboration with films (p.20-22). The literature on dance improvisation has continued to expand, offering descriptions and analyses of the practice and give voice to the shift from writing about dance as an object to writing from within, by dance improvisation practitioners⁶. Many practitioners describe their unique approach by articulating their philosophy in writing themselves, such as Gill Clark (2007), Miranda Tufnell and Chris Crickmay (1990; Tufnell & Crickmay 2004) and Helen Poyner (2008) to name a few, whereas some practitioners have been researched and documented by other dance practitioners, such as dance practitioners Steinman (1986)

⁵ Contact Improvisation is an improvisational movement practice based on the sharing and giving of weight usually between two movers. .

⁶ Some key examples of writings on dance improvisation are *Taken by Surprise* (2003), which is dedicated to essays that analyze the theme; *Body, Space, Image* (Tufnell & Crickmay 1990) is another key text that gives practical and useful notes on improvisation; and the *Dance Research Journal*, *Contact Quarterly*, *Dance Theatre Journal* and the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* are all instrumental in providing writings that document this field.

and Buckwalter (2010) who documented and researched the work of practitioner Barbara Dilley, amongst others.

2.2 The development of new dance concepts and the content of dance improvisation

One of the concepts that have influenced dance improvisation is that the dancing body is an intelligent and knowing body, and not a body that aspires to reproduce someone else's style and steps. Mabel Todd's *The Thinking Body* (1937) was a seminal text in shifting perceptions about the body in dance, and has continued to be so since. This text no doubt influenced those who came later, such as the Judson Church performers, and precedes this later period. According to Burt, a British dance history scholar, the practice of improvisation that was set by American Judson performers in the early 1960s affected the concept of intelligence as not only a mental ability but also a capability of the body and a quality that derives from the body-mind connection (2006, p. 15-18). Burt suggests that dance works of the 1960s reclaimed the body from traditional dualistic ideologies that were rooted in the Cartesian notion of the mind as the ghost in the body's machine (p15-16). Others, such as Whatley (2009 p.4) make a link between some of the Somatic and Dance Practices in their growing attention to the intelligent body. By acknowledging these sources this study identifies that with the development of improvisational practice the notion of virtuosity was revised and expanded by those practicing as well as by those writing about it. It might be that the value of virtuosity could further include different types of virtuosos, such as a virtuosic improviser as well as a virtuosic ballet dancer.

Another concept that has influenced improvisation practice in the Western culture is the notion of ‘presence’ and how to be present in the moment, and to internally pay attention and focus. Writers such as Buckwalter (2010 p.7) relate to influences from the East in the late 20th century, and acknowledge the origins of ‘presence practice’ as embedded in Buddhist relaxation techniques. And more widely it demonstrates a connection between Eastern philosophies and improvised dance⁷. Authors such as Steinman (1986) and C. Carter (2000) claim that the growing interest amongst dance practitioners in an inward focus and attention to individual experience, mark a significant shift in dance concepts. They refer to a gradual shift in the early 1970s towards an alternative to dance practices that reproduced stylized forms. Other authors, such as those who situate themselves within the field of Somatic practices⁸, such as Martha Eddy (2009), claim that the ‘diving inwards’ approach in dance has affected the development of various systems of Somatic inquiry within the 20th century. According to Eddy “[s]omatic inquiry was buoyed by this growth of existentialism and phenomenology as well as through dance and expressionism” (Eddy 2009 p.6).

The content of an improvisation class and the way improvisation is learnt may vary from one sort of enquiry to another by aspects such as the level of interaction between participants and the sort of stimuli that are employed for their

⁷ A book chapter exploring the connection between improvised dance and Zen philosophy is ‘For the taste of an apple: why I practice Zen’ (Webb, 2003)

⁸Somatic Practices is an umbrella term for an approach to body-based practices and techniques such as Alexander and Feldenkreis techniques. Although there are connections and parallels between this study and the thirst to understand lived experience that characterizes many Somatic practices, this study will not dwell on those techniques.

improvisational potential. In Contact Improvisation⁹, an improvisational practice that was created in 1972 by Steve Paxton, students will usually interact on a physical level as they give attention to their own and their partners' weight and gravity. During the work, the stimuli for Contact Improvisers tend to be focused on following the physical laws of momentum, inertia and gravity. This sort of structure provides dancers with a source for moving.

As a practice, many see improvisation as an end in itself rather than a tool for choreographing, performance or warming up (DeSpain p27). While Contact Improvisation is principally about improvising, there are other approaches to improvisation that emerge out of particular systems. In Skinner Releasing Technique¹⁰ (SRT), an American body based practice that emerged in the early 1960s, a session is likely to result in improvising but is not primarily about improvisation. SRT participants are led to use imagery as a source for movement and do not generally have much interaction with others in class, unless it is for specific guided tasks where touch is given. In the end of each SRT session, participants are encouraged to submit their writing to the teacher. This is where participants may ask any questions and therefore it is a platform for interaction. A comparison between different approaches to improvisation is useful for realizing aspects of the practice,

⁹See Novack (1990) for a pertinent study of Contact Improvisation. The initial motivation of those who created Contact Improvisation was to expand possibilities of dance performance (Carter p187). As the form developed, it became clear that Contact Improvisation was important in other ways too. As one of the characteristics of the practice is its accessibility to all, Contact Improvisation has a social message of inclusion. This means that disabled and non-disabled dancers were drawn to join together regardless of experience or background. The inclusive path that Contact Improvisation had opened up led to the development of many inclusive dance enterprises in both America and Europe (such as Touchdown Dance and Green Candle in the UK, and Axis Dance Company in the US).

¹⁰ Skinner releasing technique (SRT) was developed by Joan Skinner to offer a way of integrating creative and technical body processes. For further reading visit www.skinnerreleasing.com.

and supports this study in focusing on approaches that are primarily about improvisation.

The next section relates to strategies for reflecting on dance and focuses on talk activities as a way to approach and enter the specifics of dance improvisation practice.

2.3 Talk practice in dance context

The term ‘talk’ can have many referents, such as speech, conversation, interaction and language. This study will focus on talk as communication and as a function of human interaction within the practice of dance improvisation rather than on the mechanics of speech production, and language formation. The following discussion will therefore examine ‘talk’ as a verbal activity within the context of dance, which is generally regarded as a non-verbal activity.

Verbal interaction is part of daily life. We talk to tell stories, to ask questions, to communicate, to reflect. Reflection is a cognitive ability within critical thinking skills. According to Kassing and Jay (2003), who discuss different educational theories that can be applied in dance classes, dancers learn the skills of reasoning, justifying and explaining dance-related activities through myriad ways. They argue that dancers who read, write and discuss dance theory are translating movement into spoken terminology. By that they learn cognitive skills that include comprehending, identifying and describing (Kassing & Jay 2003 p.25). Nevertheless, Kassing and Jay claim that dancers are required to use critical thinking skills in a technique class too: “you evaluate your execution of combinations for the upcoming performance test. Then you practice the combinations applying your refinements to fine-tune your work” (p26).

In broader education research, reflective practice is a model of learning that is based on the idea of drawing lessons out of experience. The model is mostly used to improve teachers' teaching practices and potentially enables them to critically modify their skills to suit certain situations (Osterman & Kottkamp 1993). There are many different definitions and applications for reflective learning. Clegg, who researched student learning and assessment in general Higher Education, claims that in performance-based learning, reflective practice is seen as central: "reflection is a key component of the artistry" (Clegg p.4). She refers to the several ways in which it is used, such as writing a learning journal to capture thoughts, or viewing and orally analyzing video recordings of performance.

In 2002-3, Jayne Stevens from De Montfort University directed ReP: *The Performance Reflective Project* that investigated critical reflection in studio practice. Together with Birkenhead she examined "ways in which students of dance, drama/theatre and performance may learn more effectively from their practical experience by engaging with it in a reflective way" (Birkenhead & Stevens 2002 p.2). The definition they have offered in relation to students and practitioners learning how to engage in reflective practice is "purposefully thinking about experience to gain understanding and change practice" (Birkenhead & Stevens 2002 p.2). Their findings suggest that practitioners and students need to be given the license to take time for reflection that is integrated as part of the creative practice and classes, rather than self-managed reflection. In connection with talk activities, they suggest that talking freely and discussing critical thoughts openly with peers can benefit practitioners in becoming articulate individuals that can express clearly in speaking about their practice. The project also acknowledged that there are drawbacks for reflection

because it might lead to an over analytical and unproductive approach (Birkenhead & Stevens 2002 p.6-7).

Kassing and Jay (2003) also discuss a more specific approach to reflection and critical thinking which is a meta-cognitive skill. It is not uniquely associated with improvisation but is often considered in a dance pedagogy context. A meta-cognitive skill is being able to think about how we think and others think and being able to distinguish between what we know and what we do not know (Kassing & Jay 2003 p.26). This is relevant to my study for the reason that in improvisation dancers use meta-cognitive skills because of the nature of ongoing problem solving, decision making and thinking processes.

Whilst there is a range of literature that explores dance within an educational context, there is very little written that focuses specifically on the role of ‘talk’ within dance pedagogy. Nevertheless, there is some written evidence of research that has been conducted that relates to talking whilst dancing, and which refers to talk as an intervention, where dancers accompany themselves with spoken words. Whilst this study focuses on talk as a naturally occurring part of the dance improvisation process as opposed to talk as an intervention to test out dancers’ experience of talking whilst dancing, it is beneficial to consider the work of practitioners who use talk as an accompaniment to dancing. Simone Forti (2003), an American dancer and teacher whose work integrates movement and voice, has often used external stories as narrative. In the mid 1980s she developed a method of improvisation practice and performance she called *Moving the Telling*, or *Logomotion*. She used narrative sources such as news reports to inform her dance. She offers: “...speaking and moving at once, following our impulses and responding to the resulting dynamics and images....developing an intuitive flow between our movement and our speaking”

(2003 p.62). Forti's narrative approach is echoed in the work of others such as British dancers and writers Tufnell and Crickmay (1990). They suggest a similar interrelated approach to the use of stories as narrative in dance improvisation. (p.92-99). They show different possible relations between narrative and dance improvisation: "narratives may provide sources for the work; they may arise from within it; or they may shape it over all" (Tufnell & Crickmay 1990 p.98).

It is interesting to note that those who use the possibility of talking whilst dancing take a different focus. Whilst Forti (2003), and Tufnell and Crickmay (1990) focus on the narrative that may shape the dancing experience, there are others such as DeSpain (2003) and Doughty (2007) who use speech forms as ways of accessing real time improvisational experiences. Both De Spain and Doughty experimented with talk and developed different methods for exposing hidden structures and invisible tools that guide dancers. Their work is pertinent to this study's interest in how dancers' reflective talk and talk strategies embody the philosophy of the moving body that underpins improvisation.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to clarify and define the focus of this study by placing dance improvisation within an appropriate context. I have set out why my primary interest is in improvisation practice in its own terms rather than as a choreographic tool, and as a distinct activity within the dance field rather than a mode associated with many dance forms. I have discussed concepts that have influenced the practice of improvisation and I have acknowledged certain historical shifts in dance that have buoyed and supported the development of improvisational practice. One

such shift resulted from acknowledging the intelligent, or knowing body, which provided a radical alternative to the traditional view of the dancing body that aspires to reproduce someone else's style and steps. I have identified that the view of virtuosity was revised and expanded and suggest that the new view could further include different types of virtuosos. A different shift was the growing interest amongst dance practitioners towards an inward focus and attention to individual experience, which was an alternative to dance practices that reproduced exterior stylized forms.

By examining how form and structure are figured in dance improvisation, this chapter has revealed that the literature on dance improvisation appears to be generated mostly through those who practice rather than non-practitioners who examine the practice. Writers such as Banes (2003) and Buckwalter (2010), for example both had wide experience of the practice. This indicates that it is mainly those with first-hand experience of the practice that document dance improvisation. This then suggests that most dance-writers feel that in order to know about dance improvisation practice it is necessary to experience it, as the knowledge is generated through oral and embodied transmission. It is the oral aspect in the process of spreading dance improvisation knowledge that prompted my interest in dancers' talk in improvisation, and talk is central to the oral culture of improvisation. Dancers' talk is the key element in my research and thus will be investigated in more depth to discover more about its role in the oral culture of improvisation.

In the latter part of the chapter I consider the range of talk activities as features of the interaction that takes place within dance improvisation. I sought to identify the various ways in which talk activities enter a dance context. As a consequence, I argue for why I situate my study in the realm of talk activities that are

reflective rather than narrative, that have the purpose of articulating rather than blurring what takes place in the body, and that happen naturally before and after the dancing rather than within the dance as a form of intervention or performance strategy.

The contextual review provides an overview of specific approaches to dance improvisation within general dance practice and purposefully locates the focus on talk activities as one strategy for reflecting on dance. Moreover, the focus on talk activities provides a particular angle for examining dance improvisation, for accessing and determining the specifics of the practice, and the knowledge it contains.

By drawing on the findings from this chapter, the next chapter will examine the methods that might be the most appropriate for exploring how improvisation is taught and practiced in two different dance settings.

Chapter Three - Methodology

This chapter aims to construct a framework for the analysis of how dancers' 'talk' embodies the philosophy of dance improvisation practice. My intention is to outline the ethnographic approaches that have shaped the analysis and to outline the particular data collection methods that were used within the participant-observation process.

3.1 Methods that shaped this study

In attempting to describe the complexity of the fieldwork, I have drawn from Helen Thomas's perspective on the different levels of accounts that ethnographic writing requires (1993). Thomas, a sociologist with a strong interest and research expertise in dance, illustrates how the ethnographer's task is to provide an interpretation of the multiple layers of meanings conveyed in cultural events. According to Thomas, the researchers' experience is incorporated into the research since they are themselves "experiencing, moving and dancing culture bearers" (1993 p.118). The approach I have taken in this study aligns well with Thomas's theory and is therefore very useful to my thinking as a participant-observer.

One of the issues that ethnographic researchers must take into account is the reflexive nature of this process. Reflexivity has two distinct meanings in this context. The first refers to the likelihood that the involvement of the researcher will affect the very behavior being researched. The second is the researcher's awareness of his/her own subjectivity in an analytical role. With reference to the second meaning, social scientists Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) argue that reflexivity leads to a better

understanding of the social world and thus it makes the researcher's own perspectives and points of view explicit. Like Thomas, they too see the importance of including the researcher's voice and weaving it together with myriad approaches to allow a multiplicity of expression. In this way, the reflexive enquiry is used judiciously to avoid using the researcher's direct knowledge as the *only* source of investigation. Ethnographers therefore always need to make sure that their voice is not the only voice in the text. Nevertheless, in this study I have chosen to emphasize the voice of the participants rather than my own. Whilst I am not taking myself 'out' of the narrative I privilege the others' narrative and not my own.

Broadly speaking, many of the early dance ethnographies concentrated on the culture of the 'other' as their subject of research. An example of such a researcher is Sklar who has studied socio-cultural aspects of dance traditions in Torugas, New Mexico. Her research focuses on a certain public dance and she is particularly interested in the dancers' relationship with faith. She explores how it feels to dance this dance and what social meaning it carries, and recognizes how the dancer's bodily experience is transformed into words and cultural meaning. She refers to the dancer's level of kinesthetic awareness and explains how this awareness exists in both dancing itself and in the religious context (Sklar 2000 p.72). Like Sklar's research, this study is interested in the transformation of bodily experience into words.

In connection with the shift from a positivist to a post-positivist approach in thinking, socio-cultural anthropology had a second shift (the first one being the permission to include the voice of 'the other' in the research). Researchers moved from looking out to other cultures as a site of research, into looking at their own culture as important and even as an 'exotic' subject of study. It meant that researchers started to look at their own field with an aim of deepening their knowledge of its

nature. A pioneering home-culture research which explored this new approach was conducted by Kealiinohomoku (1983) who studied ballet as an ethnic form of dance. Koutsouba's research is another example (1999). Being a Greek dance scholar she investigated her own dance traditions in her own country. For her it was a case of making the familiar strange in order for her to see more and find out about the values of those who danced, thus adopting an ethnographic perspective. Similar to Kealiinohomoku and Koutsouba's research, this study intends to examine a familiar event as if it is foreign by adopting a more distant view. My aim is to offer observations about my own experiences, and particularly those of the participants, in a way that an outsider to the practice will understand more about dance improvisation.

This study is also shaped by Dils and Crosby (2001), dance ethnographers who have referred to the dynamic nature of the data they collect. Dils and Crosby, who study music-based Jazz Dance in America, describe the process of analysis and writing as dialogical, and show how the dialogue existed at many levels such as a dialogue between the writers and the dancers, and between the writers and the text. They describe how their documenting had shifted so that the way they perceived a movement when starting to observe had changed over time, and how they described it differently after further investigation: “[a] movement action that was termed ‘under-curve’ turned into the term ‘hovering’” (2001 p.72). Similar to their approach, this research attempts to refine the understanding and naming of what is observed in the field and attempts to retain a dialogical character.

Ethnographic writing is emergent in character and the idea that the knowledge emerges from the study itself is opposed to traditional positivist research that aims to reveal the truth by first establishing a proven set of research questions and models. This feature can make the ethnographic process rather challenging because

researchers need to stay open-minded and to take into consideration that the methodology and even the theme of the study might shift over time; “what starts as one kind of study may transform into another” (Green & Stinson 1999 p.114). My own study has developed over time and although it hasn’t transformed during the process it has required me to stay open-minded and to allow the experience of the participants to guide the research’s outcomes.¹¹

3.2 My own background

My background as a dance practitioner has allowed me to rely on my own embodied knowledge to inform the research, knowledge that would not be accessible to a non-practitioner. My dance culture, the practices I studied, my physical preferences and creative interest are all incorporated into the way I research and therefore feed my understanding. One example of physical history that informed this work is my training in the Eshkol-Wachman (EW) notation system. The system has influenced the study, as it is a lens through which to view improvisation in particular ways. The influence is to some extent on the way I have perceived the work, such as an awareness of a body reference system that relates to all movements as enclosed within a sphere (Eshkol & Harries p.2). Practically, it meant for me that I was aware of the possibility of ‘taking’ the sphere with me when I face a new direction (a ‘body wise’ sphere) or the possibility of relating to one direction as the starting position for all measurements in the sphere, which is named absolute zero (a ‘space wise’ sphere). This awareness has likely influenced how I see others move in space. Since the EW

¹¹It is worth acknowledging that scientists too claim that quantitative findings are actually revisable and incomplete. For further reading about the benefits of scientific research in dance read Chatfield (1999) in *Researching Dance: Evolving modes of inquiry* (part 2 Chapter 5).

notation system has informed, however unconsciously, the way I experience and observe dance, it has also informed my note taking. For example, in my field notes I write “half the group were dancing in the center of the studio while the other half observed them facing (4)” (referring to EW numbered directions) which illustrates how I bring this prior knowledge to my note-taking.

According to Al-Dor, (2009 p.283-320) an Israeli dance writer, the system sets certain ways of analyzing movement, which affect the way a trained user thinks about movement, and looks for structures in particular ways. As the system can be used for analysis as well as for choreography, the experience of executing a notated dance often proposes a specific awareness of simultaneous movement, which enables the user to ask particular questions about the movement. Although I acknowledge that EW system probably plays a role in my method collection methods, this study is not directly referring to the system and is not using it as a specific tool for analysis of the fieldwork.

3.3 The data collection methods

The first stage of my data collection methods involved attending and fully participating and engaging in both fields (class and group meeting), while sometimes mentally and physically distancing myself from the activity in order to see the familiar as strange. In the studio, I often shifted back and forth between dancing and taking notes of my observations in my notebook. It meant that while dancing I tried hard to allow myself to be absorbed in what I was doing and trust that I would later remember what needed writing down in my notes. My notes provided descriptions of any immediate content in the studio such as that related to my own experience, of tasks

given, of scores¹² (both abandoned and executed) and of things people said. Some notes were formulated from a pre-reflective, sensory state of mind and were hence more poetic, while other notes were phrased from a more analytical approach. I shifted between head and body ‘spaces’, anchoring my note making in what I saw as well as in what I experienced. My methods included noting down different types of talk that were important for different situations in the studio. I paid attention to what people said and whether certain talk actions were repeated in these events. I identified these actions as an interesting activity that I wanted to further investigate.

The second stage of data collection was to review the notes and process them. I looked for significant or recurring aspects in the notes and highlighted these for further consideration. Some extracts from the notes can be found in appendix 2; this is selected from approximately 60 pages of note taking and jottings. A very useful method in the processing stage was to draw a diagram, in which I located ideas in order to notice if a structure was emerging. Outlining the way elements related to each other helped me to make sense of my findings and to realize what it is they represent. The diagram helped me to focus the research and clarify my interest in how certain talk activities embody the philosophy of moving in dance improvisation (see original and new diagrams in appendix 3).

My writing method relied on re-experiencing and re-finding the memories of somatic experience from the studio. So that even though over time I was less often in the studio, I used the strategy of relying on what remained with me as an embodied knowledge. Similar to the previous note-taking stage, in this stage too I was shifting

¹² The term score refers to the rules decided on before an improvisation that determines the content and progress of the dancing (Buckwalter p199). I am going to discuss the ‘score’ in more detail in Chapter 5.

from a ‘head space’, where I was analyzing observations and experiences, to a pre-reflective ‘bodily space’, where I would return to the tacit knowledge of my sensorial explorations.

3.4 Details of the fieldwork

The research took place in two fields. The first field was a weekly dance improvisation class for undergraduates dance students at Coventry University. The group consisted of third year students and the classes took place between 2007 and 2009. The students had dance improvisation classes and workshops as part of their training, and I joined the sessions as a participant-observer for this period of two years. I followed myriad improvisation events that the group was involved in, but for the purposes of this study, I will be specifically focusing on the group’s weekly classes taught by Lucia Walker¹³, which I attended for approximately one year. The class lasted an hour and a half and usually happened in the same physical setting, which provided a steady environment. There were twenty-three students registered to do the class. Among those, there were a stable number of about 15 female students around the age of twenty who attended the class regularly.

The second field was a series of improvisation meetings, known (and named by the group itself) as the ‘Wednesday Group’. This was an artist-led group of local West Midlands dance and music artists who met regularly to practice and share improvisation practice. The meeting lasted two hours and all participants were

¹³ Walker is a British dance artist who has been teaching and practicing Contact Improvisation and Alexander technique nationally and internationally, since the 1980s. She has been researching and performing improvisation with many collaborating artists and has worked in the department previously.

experienced practitioners who had completed music or dance training. Among them there were dance teachers, performers and other art-related practitioners, and there were many pre-existing personal and professional links between members of the group. The majority of participants were female and the age ranged from early 20s to late 50s. Over the years, the group's structure changed. Activity began in 2007 and during 2009 moved from weekly meetings to bi-monthly meetings. Some committed participants attended right from the start, while others joined along the way and some stopped coming. Altogether there were approximately 14 participants whereas a meeting normally held any number of participants between 2 and 10, with an average of 6.

Venues changed over time. The group initially rented a studio in Warwick University, and in September 2008 Coventry University invited the group to be permanently hosted in its studios. The fieldwork draws on my experience as a participant-observer having attended the group for a period of three years, from when it started in 2007 until 2010.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed some of the features of the ethnographic process as a qualitative, post-positivist method of dance research in a socio-cultural context. I have identified participant observation as a suitable method for researching dance improvisation and have made clear that my approach has been to privilege the voice of the participants over my own in the context of the reflexive aspects of the method. By also exploring the methods of other dance ethnographers, I identified methods of translating lived experience to words (1991), making the familiar strange (Kealiinohomoku 1983), (Koutsouba 1999), retaining a dialogical character in the

writing process (Dils & Crosby 2001) and strategies of open-mindedness (Green & Stinson 1999), all of which have shaped and determined this study's methodology.

I have described my own background and specifically my training in EW notation system, which is relevant to the way in which I observe movement. By doing so, I showed the way the researcher's embodied knowledge is allowed in the study process and how this is relevant to my study. My aim has been to outline my data-collection methods and my approach to the fieldwork, such that others could reproduce the methods.

The next two chapters will adopt this ethnographic process to expose the complex web of socio-cultural meanings in dance improvisation. The first of these will specifically examine the different talk activities of a group of undergraduate dance students participating in dance improvisation to find out the extent to which, and how, talk feeds the dance.

Chapter Four – An Ethnographic Study of Dance Improvisation in the Undergraduate Dance Curriculum

This chapter provides an analysis of a dance improvisation class for undergraduate dance students at Coventry University. This group offered a valuable site for this study for two reasons. The work they do is typical¹⁴ of how dance improvisation is taught within a higher education context, and an experienced improvisation practitioner led the teaching. Lucia Walker, who is a very knowledgeable guest dance tutor in the faculty, guided the students through an experience that was designed to prepare them to enter the professional world of dance.

4.1 Access to the field

The analysis that follows is drawn from my experience as a participant-observer in Walker's classes. The students granted me permission to collect data (see appendix 1), and knew that I did not seek to assess them or predict their behavior. The students were made aware that I was seeking to understand, through observation, what might be seen as the foundation of the activity, which supports the dance as it unfolds.

The fieldwork provided me with access to a process that would otherwise not be revealed in this way. This is because the process of studying dance in a learning environment is rarely a public event. Being a post-graduate research student, I was invited to join those classes and thus gained the practical access to the setting. My presence was not likely to disrupt the activity because although I was not a member of

¹⁴ Although my study did not involve specific research into assessing the extent to which the work is 'typical', the faculty teaching team discussed it with me as typifying the kind of experience provided to HE dance students.

the student group, the students knew me and were anyway used to occasional attendees from beyond the group including other postgraduate students. Nonetheless, the students knew I was researching the ‘field’ so there may have been a change in how they danced and behaved. This is unavoidable and part of the ethnographic process, therefore it is something I acknowledge and bear in mind when I draw out meanings from the field.

Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1983) useful analysis of ethnographic processes is not situated in the context of dance studies but nevertheless was a main source for this study and provided a theoretical framework on which I could anchor my own research. To use their theoretical terminology, Walker was the ‘gatekeeper’ of the research setting (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983 p.49) as she granted me permission to explore it. She supported my research by allowing the constant shift between participating and taking notes during classes, and by agreeing to be interviewed and for me including her words from class.¹⁵

4.2 Class initial gathering and circle-talk

A typical class began when students gathered in the studio after a mid-morning break and one of them completed the register that Walker left there for that purpose. By doing so it seemed that Walker passed a silent message of trust to the group, that they will not mark anyone who is not present. This initial part of class also enabled students to inform Walker about any injuries or illness. During that process, positions for the forthcoming class were established; some students sat out to watch, indicating they were ‘out’, and most students entered the space in the studio to

¹⁵ This chapter has been read and approved by Walker. I use inverted commas for all direct quotes and single-quote marks for indirectly referring to (i.e. paraphrasing) Walker’s speech.

indicate they were 'in'. When not feeling well enough to participate, students would observe and take notes, as this was a class that was compulsory for them to attend.

After completing the register, the class usually continued with a check-in for the group. Walker would say a few words about her intentions for that day and about her sense of the present 'energy' level of the students. In this initial stage of class, she would sometimes say to the students that she confronts her own class-plans with what she sees and hears, to check if she still believes what she planned will be suitable or needs adjustment. By sharing her thoughts with the students, Walker made clear the dialogic nature of the class; a more shared and democratic process than that of the 'traditional'¹⁶ dance class in which the division between teacher and student is probably more marked. This would normally be followed by a seated circle-talk where Walker often invited all students to share with the group one word or sentence regarding what interested them or a challenge that they were facing. She sometimes named this activity as a 'wish list', a choice of words that seemed to encourage students to notice and express their own direction and personal challenges. At other times, the circle-activity was more of a general invitation to share any words with the rest of the group.

In the circle, one student said, "I wish to be stronger in my body and more focused in class" another student said "I want to move more fluidly and with less pauses" and someone else said "I am aware I am tired, stiff and too busy with my dissertation". It is interesting to notice the connection between what the student said in this last example and how she moved afterwards in the session. I noticed she

¹⁶ By traditional I refer to dance classes that involve the teacher leading the class through a series of set exercises and dance phrases, as part of their technical development, and usually based on a specific dance style or a codified vocabulary.

moved quite energetically as if the talk had manifested itself in the act of improvising by liberating her from her description of her physical state and leading to change. So although the talk contradicted the dance, naming her experience supported the letting go of the weariness and seemed to change how she felt. By motivating the students to comment on their practice, Walker gave them a chance to display individuality and reflect on their own development. But it was also a chance for them to hear their peers who by taking part in this talk activity, expressed willingness for communication with others. Another aspect of this activity that supported the peer-communication was the fact that Walker usually invited those who were sitting out and observing to be included in the talk activity, reinforcing its importance. The activity's circle-shape seemed to also provide participants with a sense of equality and collectivity, where all members were valued.

The circle-talk was repeated in most classes either at the beginning or end, sometimes both. The repeatability of this activity had the sense that it is “carried out with some degree of self-consciousness...” (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983 p.169) and hence I describe it as *talk ritual*. The term ‘ritual’ is borrowed from Hammersley and Atkinson’s theory of ethnography and relates here to an activity that is repeatable and expected, is done regularly and with a sense of a custom.

The decision to go into a circle seemed to also echo an established ritual in Contact Improvisation (see 2.2). Nancy Stark Smith, one of the founders of Contact Improvisation has termed the initial circle-talk as Pow-wow – a term she borrowed from a notion of gathering in the Native American culture (2008). She also named the ending circle as Harvest or Thanksgiving. In her suggested structure for improvisation sessions named the Under Score (Smith, et al. 2008), she perceives the circle-talk as an integral part of dance improvisation practice, and particularly Contact

Improvisation. When referring to others who consider the role of the circle-talk, it is also useful to acknowledge Kaltenbrunner's theory on the role of circle-talk in Contact Improvisation (Kaltenbrunner 1998 p.33). In his view, the circle-talk functions as a structure for arriving and a form of showing willingness to work safely together. His view seems to hint towards a more therapeutic approach towards dance and therefore echoes more generally dance movement therapy practices. It appears that what started in specific contexts such as in Contact Improvisation and in therapeutic sessions is now adopted for at least some other dance settings where improvisation is the principal focus.

In the context of existing talk opportunities within dance improvisation, it is worth considering the outcome of the absence of talk. In a conference in 2011¹⁷, Nicole Harbonnier-Topin, a Canadian dance writer, demonstrated how important it is to enable dancers to reflect on their experience in a choreographic process. In the case she described, it was claimed that the lack of speaking opportunities led to the dancer's stress and loss of autonomy. This case amplifies the notion that reflection on actions allows dancers to reclaim or recognize the richness of their experience.

The notion of the circle-talk in Walker's class as an important talk opportunity for the students is therefore supported by my own experience as a participant-observer, by noting the existence of this ritual in the context of other dance-related practices (Contact Improvisation and Dance Movement Therapy) and

¹⁷ Nicole Harbonnier-Topin presented the unpublished paper *Somatic Tools without Somatic Principles: Tensions in a Creative Process in Dance* at the *Dance & Somatic Practices Conference*, Coventry University 2011.

by acknowledging other research that points out that the lack of talk-opportunities has a detrimental affect on the dancer.

4.3 Class further activities and constructed chat

After about five minutes of talk, the class would continue with a warm-up. Walker called it sometimes ‘waking-up the wisdom of the body’. Warming-up was often in pairs where one student gave another student some guided touching bodywork. It was hard to draw a clear line between the end of the warm-up and the beginning of other (continuing) exploration work. But by and large, after the warm-up the sessions continued with movement tasks to be practiced alone, or in small groups, and were followed by dancing in bigger groups or as a single large group. The tasks included various exercises where we practiced waking-up attention to elements such as our states of mind and body-alignment.

Generally, there appeared to be a process through each class, as the students’ focus was guided to gradually shift from the internal to the external during the session. By this I mean that while in the beginning of class tasks were designed to work on paying attention to subtle aspects such as following an inner kinetic idea, or an image, the later tasks normally emphasized considering the others in the room. The shift to an external focus also related to work on performing skills, which meant dancing with an audience in mind. As an example of the process of shifting focus, I described in my notebook an ‘internal’ image we worked with; “flow – in space and between parts of myself” (14/11/08) which later in the session developed into an external focus, which I described as a process of “receiving something - responding - giving something out”. This strategy seemed to build what amounted to a repertoire of improvising possibilities. It provided a quality of flow in movement (I wrote

“softening and waking up at the same time”), and gave a sense of purpose in the group work. The notion of being part of an environment where one could affect it and be affected by it, led to a sense of individual ownership as well as playfulness.

I found that Walker often chose to start with a task of being in physical contact with another. This meant that the focus was quite internal and not so much on the wider group. When the initial internal focus relied on touch, Walker gradually shifted the class focus to what she named as the “flavor of contact when not in contact”. In this way, the memory of touch became a shared focus and stimulus for a non-touch dance, which promoted a sense of a common path with the rest of the group.

Throughout the session there was often another type of *talk ritual*, which emerged as a constructed chat with another student. While the circle-talk happened in the edges of the class, as it occurred at the start and end of the sessions, the constructed chat was woven in between tasks and scores. Small-group work is a common pedagogical strategy that is often used in both a dance and non-dance class situation to support learning and allow for meaningful engagements to occur. In their description of dance teaching methods, Kassing and Jay (2003) offer talk tasks in pairs as a reciprocal teaching strategy for developing critical thinking skills within dance students (p.25-26). In Walker’s class, students were guided to ‘share’ their experience with another. This opportunity was a chance for students to establish friendships in the group. It was also an important time for a non-public discussion and therefore a chance to speak in more length and depth than one might in a whole group situation.

The constructed chat had many variations to it. Sometimes the instructions were to just listen to each other without responding verbally, while at other times it

was open for a dialogue. Sometimes the chat was attached to a dancing exercise and provided a way of reflecting or giving feedback before swapping roles, while at other times it seemed as if words developed organically from the moving tasks and Walker would encourage us to carry on the talk-exchange by framing it with time (“take a few more minutes to share with a partner”). In terms of quality of talk, some conversations were easy to make whereas others felt somehow forced, either since there was nothing to say or perhaps because the situation did not feel appropriate for instant discussion of raw experience with a specific partner.

The constructed chat appeared to be an effective pedagogical tool for learning to reflect on and analyze dance experience in class. The constructed chat was important for learning how to reflect as it provided a private platform for practicing it. In this way it can be seen as feeding into other talk opportunities in class. It was a chance for students to verbally formulate any insights as well as to hear their peers’ insights and to interact with each other. Students reflected on what they had noticed in themselves after moving. A student said, “I felt playful, like a child”, another student said, “I surprised myself with crazy things I do not normally do”. Someone else said “I pretended nobody was in the studio with me and enjoyed dancing as if I was on my own.” There was an interesting connection between what the student from the last example said and what I observed in her dancing that day. The talk clarified the dance, what she said illuminated how she was moving. I noticed she danced in a way that made her ‘transparent’ so that the person she is was not so much hiding behind habitual ways of moving, and what she said confirmed what I saw.

In examining class activities it became clear that the work in class held two main practices. These practices are firstly a physical focus, where students acquire structural knowledge of the moving body (skeletal awareness, body-interconnection,

movement-fluidity), and secondly thought-strategies, where students learn to wake-up attention to their thinking and decision-making. The two practices together facilitated whole-body awareness and appeared to be connected and interrelated. The next sections explore some improvisational thought-strategies by examining the values and pedagogical methods that are attached to and embedded within them.

4.4 Methods of learning about uncertainty and intuition

Whenever introducing an exercise, Walker often asked one of the students to demonstrate with her. She once said in class: “It is possible for students to recognize qualities through a demonstration”. An example gave us the opportunity to see what she meant, and to observe the ‘mechanics’ so that when we experienced it ourselves we could follow the same physical pathways. In the beginning of the course, it was noticeable that students who were chosen to demonstrate an exercise or movement idea with Walker looked anxious with the situation. Over time, as class structure and content became more familiar, students showed more confidence. Later, being chosen to demonstrate seemed like a great honor and so students appeared to be proud if being chosen and being put ‘on the spot’.

Demonstrating as a method of learning was also an opportunity for students who demonstrated with Walker to exercise being in a state of uncertainty. Walker would often say to a student who demonstrated with her (and to the class) ‘I realize it’s tricky because I know what we are doing and you don’t’. She would say it with empathy, but at the same time, there was a message that it is done for a reason and that this sort of ‘not knowing’ can take us out of habits, and it is a chance for learning something new. Being put ‘on the spot’ for demonstrating called for the same skills

that were needed for improvising during class, the skills of surrendering to instincts and following intuition. Dance artist Gill Clarke claimed that by training dancers in being mindful of their senses, improvisational practices redress the balance between rational mind and intuitive self (2007, p35-37). Her approach reinforces this study's understanding that working intuitively was one of the many strategies that were taught in class. It meant that students learnt that sometimes they could let go of planning and reasoning about their dance 'steps'. Students learnt about tacit knowledge and about allowing the body's understanding to be respected. Walker guided us to 'quiet our brain about ideas of success or not'. In my own experience, I often sensed that this message implied that there is no need for reasoning and this helped me settle into myself and find clarity in movement. Adam Benjamin, writing about dance improvisation claims:

It is the ability to live with uncertainty and awkwardness of not knowing that allows access to our creativity.

(Benjamin 2002 p.51)

Others, such as American philosopher Brene' Brown (2007), have also acknowledged the connection between unfavorable senses and positive outcomes. Brown's research shows that vulnerability is the birthplace of creativity. Students in class were encouraged to accept a 'not knowing' state of mind when demonstrating an exercise as well as when dancing. It reveals how the method of accepting uncertainty promotes a quality of unfamiliarity in movement. The dancing felt and looked unfamiliar and fresh as the movements were discovered right there and then and there was less chance of falling into movement patterns. It is useful to consider how Helen Poynor, a British dance practitioner, teacher, writer and therapist, describes the quality of movement dancers often find in her dance workshops;

... their movement reveals rather than conceals who they are, making them more rather than less visible, allowing them to 'shine through'. There are memorable, radiant moments in workshops when a participant becomes fully present in their movement and they can be seen in all their individuality rather than as someone struggling with, or mastering, a particular style.

(Poynor 2008 p.89)

In Walker's class, the work with uncertainty resulted in the outcome of each individual generating her own way of moving. When commenting on her practice during class, a student said, "I begin to recognize the times when I do not know what to expect". Students gradually started to notice and accept those thoughts, and one described her experience by saying: "I followed the movement without planning how it will look or what will come after it". There was a clear connection between what this last student said and how she improvised. In the structure of dancing, then talking, then dancing again, the talk had a dual role. It shed light on the dancing it followed and it envisioned and supported the dance that it preceded. In the student's dance, I noticed how she kept a perspective on the dynamic flow that happened around her in class and drew on it playfully and within what seemed an instant. Over time, it seemed that the awareness of uncertainty and intuitive processes penetrated into the students' way of thinking and hence entered their dance, which in return flowed more easily and became more daring. The thought-strategy they had learned became embodied in their moving. The outcome of learning was the ownership of the thought-strategy to guide both the dancing and the reflection on dancing. In my notebook I reflect on an experience of having "lots of places to get lost in" during class. I learnt to embrace the sense of 'not knowing' and to treat it as a chance for an interesting starting point rather than as a barrier to moving.

4.5 The teacher's verbal input is translated into students' thought-strategy

Besides practicing uncertainty, another learning process was afforded by listening to Walker's verbal insights. In class, Walker provided students with a constant flow of verbal input. According to Mainwaring and Krasnow (2010) who study dance pedagogy, dance teachers employ different strategies to approach dance learning. Audio, visual and tactile ways of learning enhance the students' ability to access and master the skills of dancing. In the audio way, the students hear an explanation on a physical task. Walker demonstrated how an audio learning approach is useful, she would say things such as "do not fall in love with what you say or dance. Let it live a short life and then flow away... Do not to get attached to it..." and "find the possibilities in your body". Walker's insightful commentary often referred to common ambitions that dancers may have in improvisation classes: ambitions such as to come up with interesting or completely new moves. She often recommended trying to undo those habits when in class¹⁸.

Much of Walker's verbal input occurred at the same time as the group was dancing. This simultaneous focus imbued the given tasks with meaning, and equipped students with thought-strategies that were useful to what they were doing. In this way it seemed that Walker's verbal input was translated into students' actions but also into tools of thinking about moving. For example, as a participant in class I could draw on my own experience of how for me Walker's words transformed from being what I recognized initially as her own insights into becoming my own embodied knowledge. This was because in her class I was able to tangibly experience what she was talking

¹⁸ This is a key principle in Alexander technique.

about. As students we were able to embody those insights through her guidance so that these words did not feel empty of meaning. This also reveals that Walker was very focused on the students' actions; she usually had an immediate response to whatever arose within class. She would say things like: "Were you able to appreciate how clever the body is?" Through this way of teaching in response to occurrences in class, together with her constant words, there was a feeling that a special, one-off, experience was designed for the students' needs on that very day.

In an interview with Walker (Jan. 9th 2009), she said that she normally would take time to plan a class, but was open to follow what comes and that she was sometimes unaware of what it was that she followed. Walker's description of her own teaching approach echoes again Clarke's (2007) ideas about the importance of intuition. It reinforces the notion that dance improvisation trains us to develop the ability to become aware through the senses. Walker's approach seemed to emphasize that students need to rely on sensory ability as one aspect of resourcefulness and to learn to balance it in order to avoid privileging thought over action.

Walker's ability to draw from her wide experience and knowledge was considerable. The dedicated way in which she carried out her role contributed to the sense that she was in control for the benefit of the students. This sort of genuine response to the students' actions also served as a living example for the participants of how a teacher (of dance improvisation) can accept the unexpected and stay flexible.

Walker's teaching methods enabled a process of transforming verbal information into body-knowledge. When students talked about moving (in circle-talk, constructed chat and other occasional opportunities for comments during class), they could manifest their internal experience. They were then also able to reflect on how they think, for example, a student said: "I told myself 'just go for it'". Through

observing and listening, I determined that ‘talking’ has two modalities in the class context: One is of thoughts that are spoken and verbalized, the other is of thoughts that stay silent, unspoken and internal, which are described here as *inner talk*.

4.6 Dancers’ inner talk

Structuring and naming the content of *inner talk* in dance improvisation creates a tension because of the nature of dance improvisation as an un-codified system. In the desire for sharing the tacit knowledge of dance improvisation, my fieldwork has benefited from considering De Spain’s (2003) and Doughty’s (2007) research. Similarly to this study, their research finds links between moving and talking in dance improvisation. De Spain, an American dancer and scholar, recorded himself and six other dancers who report their experience as they dance alone in a studio for 45 minutes each. Listening to the reports, he analyzed their expressions of the experience. He sought common ground that would explain the improvisational process. It was useful to read his understanding that:

The internal awareness of the improviser can encompass a rich stew of sensations, images, memories, intentions, aesthetic considerations, and much, much more;

(De Spain 2003 p.30).

Doughty (2007), a British dance artist and lecturer, has used De Spain’s reporting model of talking whilst improvising in her research and added to it with the use of video recording. By developing ways of entering spontaneous creative processes in dance improvisation, her research demonstrates ways of teaching students the skills of self-reflection on performance.

Both studies by De Spain and Doughty encouraged me to explore whether I could glimpse into the students' inner world and identify their decision-making in an *inner talk*. However, their approaches relate to 'talk' that involves an intervention since the action of reporting is blended into the dancing, whereas this study focuses on talk as naturally occurring. By exploring *inner talk*, this study wishes to expose an existing internal creative process that often stays tacit, and therefore unspoken within the practice. Acknowledging this process is important for realizing what is in effect a toolbox that dancers draw on in dance improvisation. Noticing how students 'organically' relate to experience and interpret work in class, made the *inner talk* process more tangible. In an example of a student voicing her decision-making, she reflected on a certain concept we explored that day, saying, "it made me appreciate anything that happens in the present, and it made me realize the special composition of people and objects in the studio". The fact that this student, as well as others in her group, shared their discoveries, helped to reveal the existence of an *inner talk*, showing how dancers process information, think and make decisions as they connect between words and movements.

It is useful to consider how the *inner talk* might be related to other ways of processing information through the body. Penny Greenland, a British movement practitioner who wrote about body intelligence and movement play, discusses how the experience of the body gives rise to a way of learning and names it "body thoughts" (Greenland 2000 p.29). She claims that in order to enable children to use body intelligence we need to make the processes of "body thinking" conscious, so that they can be used at will. Ken Robinson, a renowned writer on education and creativity goes further in his off of how we might rethink children's education. Robinson claims

that as a culture we (in the West) disembodied people, as we concentrate on the head and neglect the kinesthetic way of thinking (2001).

Like Greenland and Robinson, this study recognizes too that once we notice and recognize our body-experiences, they can offer access to a different mode of thought. These thoughts give us access to a pool of information we can use in order to resolve problems, discover new insights, and which in turn loop back into the movement experience. Talk has a double role in this process: It helps by articulating those insights gained through experience and reflection, which becomes a virtuous circle; one connecting to the next, which then enriches the next. Talk also helps to stimulate new experiences and to spark creativity.

4.7 Conclusion

In exploring the link between talking and improvising in a learning environment this chapter has provided examples of students' talk in conjunction with their dance. It recognizes some important values and methods that are used in the process of acquiring improvisational skills. I have identified core values such as relying on intuition for decision-making, challenging oneself by aiming to become more aware and present, and privileging movement that is personal and displays individuality rather than movement that is more familiar and habitual. I have also defined several pedagogical methods such as teaching through example or demonstrating in class, and the teacher's verbal input in response to the students' moving as it emerges. I have discovered that there are several talk opportunities that naturally occur in class before and after dancing, which are repeated and expected, and I term these *talk rituals*. The rituals I found were circle-talk (peer-group discussions) in the beginning and end of class, and constructed chats (in pairs) that

were woven through the class. I found that dancers employ another *talk ritual*, which I argue is a more tacit and soundless strategy. I named it *inner talk* and identified that dancers employ an inner decision-making process to guide their actions whilst dancing. As a participant-observer in class I was contemplating my own internal creative process experience as well as listening carefully for students' comments on their experiences. Through this, I found that Walker demonstrated her own *inner talk* in the words she shared in class. Walker's words played a central role within the talk activities in dance improvisation. As teacher she was both 'inside' and 'outside' the dancing but her talk was significant in feeding the students' dancing, in establishing the themes and in supporting the students' ability to reflect on the dance.

Having explored the experience of pre-professional dancers within a class context, the next chapter further explores the connection between words and actions in dance improvisation, and this time in a group of experienced dance practitioners.

Chapter Five – An Ethnographic Study of Improvisation in a Dance Practitioner Group.

5.1 Field study description

This chapter provides an analysis of fieldwork observations carried out through my attendance at a series of improvisation meetings of the ‘Wednesday Group’. The meetings lasted two hours and operated as a laboratory for trying out or sharing movement ideas in a playful and friendly atmosphere where participants could either take the role of setting up and leading the activity or of following others. Participants often took turns in leading activities, but sometimes the structure was much more open and there was no leader or stated focus. I have chosen to research this group since the practitioners who assembled the group were experienced improvisation practitioners.

The gathering was termed as a ‘meeting’ rather than a ‘jam’. A ‘jam’ is an informal term that refers to an improvising ‘get-together’ in various art disciplines (e.g. music, theatre). Dancers who gather to specifically practice Contact Improvisation commonly use the term. Contact Improvisation was indeed part of the Wednesday Group’s activity, as well as other applications of improvisation.

Venues changed over time. In some venues, participants had to share the rental costs, a condition which had the effect of participants relying on others’ commitment. In the initial group, arrangements were made for the regular attendees to split the costs no matter if they came or not, and any additional attendees paid a charge which went to the regulars who did not come. This payment arrangement demonstrated the commitment and enthusiasm that participants had in the first few months, as they were willing to financially invest in the group to maintain its

existence. When in September 2008 Coventry University invited the group to be permanently hosted in its studios, there were no more requirements for rental costs.

My research developed out of an existing knowledge of the Wednesday Group's work and draws from my own experience and background as a dancer, which in return provides me with access to people and events thus shaping my experience in the field. As discussed in chapter four, this study draws on Hammersley and Atkinson's (1983) model for micro research as an approach for constructing theory. Following their model, this chapter is concerned with making sense of local structures and actions and with applying the findings across a wider range of phenomena (Hammersley & Atkinson p.189). In discussing the activity of a particular improvisation group and by defining its social organization, this study therefore attempts to better understand dance improvisation and hence to see the small details as "repositories of larger cultural conditions." (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p.189). What follows is an analysis of the group's work.

5.2 The group's activity – initial chat

The meeting usually started with people arriving to the studio, changing clothes or unpacking musical instruments, getting ready and chatting to each other. Although informal, it became clear that for participants this part of the meeting was quite important for networking and supporting each other's practice. Participants privately chatted to others about their own work as dance practitioners and got to know each other better. They shared professional information about performances and workshops through a friendly conversation with their peers. This pre-moving networking part of the meeting enabled individuals to not only connect, but to voice

their experience. The recognition of the individual in the group seemed to enhance empathy between participants, and the actual event where participants gather to share their experience seemed to promote a sense of belonging, both to the group and to the wider practice. As this was a group of professionals, participants would reference other organizational institutions and known teachers, so that there was a feeling that the group's wealth of experience derives from and indicates a wider context of improvisational practice.

As in the students' group, this talk activity was expected and repeatable, thus I identify it here as a *talk ritual* (see 4.3). The *talk ritual* naturally emerged as a friendly 'chat' during the arrival, and was normally followed by a physical warm-up.

5.3 Warm-up and circle-talk

The warm-up was either undertaken individually or as a group. In an individual warm-up, participants would find their own way of moving by rolling on the floor, running, stretching, lying down quietly, or whatever was needed to do to feel comfortable. In a group warm-up one of the dancers would lead the others through a similar activity. In the warm-up participants took time to pay attention to their needs and attend to them. It is useful to consider Tufnell's view about the process of giving form to the senses: "we take possession of our experiences rather than letting our responses exist within us as symptoms" (Tufnell 2000 p.14). By giving attention, participants were able to form their sensations into movement (or stillness), a process that created a context of ownership. The possibility of giving our experience a visible shape or configuration was quite satisfying and even more so in the company of others who did the same. I reflected on the warm-up process in my notebook, writing "I felt quite chatty still as the initial chat quieted down, so I ran

around the room energetically”. This is an example of giving form to an experience. I followed the energy of my urge to stay verbal and chat and transformed it into a physical form of running.

After about 10 minutes of a warm-up, a seated circle usually emerged on the floor and became a circle-talk. Similar to the *talk ritual* in the students’ group, people gathered to share intentions. But while in the student group it was Walker who invited a circle, in the Wednesday group the circle seemed to emerge itself as an agreed and common practice. Participants used this talk opportunity to agree on a structure for the meeting, and talk about their warm-up experiences. I noticed that the warm-up activity usually set up the place for the verbal reflection on moving. It was as if the moving in the warm-up and the talking in the circle were different layers of paying attention to details of experiences such as memories and sensations. In the circle-talk, participants suggested movement ideas, explained ideas in more detail to those who were less familiar with a certain score, or if continuing a practice from previous weeks, those who were absent were ‘clued in’.

The circle *talk ritual* was often about agreeing on a score. For example, on one occasion we made a list of ‘roles’ such as a role of generating a narrative, a role of noticing the phrasing of movements and a role of finding a momentum in movements. Each of us had to choose one role and keep to it for 20 minutes. When compared to the students’ sessions, where the structure was usually guided, here the score emerged from what participants had offered. Historically, a score is a musical term that stands for structured information regarding a piece of music. In dance, the idea of a score has been subsequently applied in choreography, in dance notation and

in improvisation.¹⁹ In dance improvisation the score tends to be quite idiosyncratic and can include words, pictures, symbols and so on. Unlike in music where a score tends to be developed from an established notation system, a score in dance can be a notated score but in improvisation refers to a map or reference point that is agreed but is deliberately open to how it is ‘read’ and interpreted. In Contact Improvisation, seen here as a particular form within improvisation, an Underscore (see 4.3) stands for a well known score among improvisation dancers, that is done without speaking (after the initial Pow-wow) and intends to include all developments that naturally tend to happen in a Contact Improvisation jam (see 5.1).

5.4 Existence/lack of score and ending circle-talk

Once there was an agreement on the structure for the session (score), the dancing and music playing followed seamlessly. The content of the score, however, varied. One time we decided to take turns to observe a dancing partner, another time we worked individually with a specific word that each of us chose (see appendix 2), and another time we decided to start our dance in a group-circle and to enter and exit the dance from this shape. It was interesting to notice that sometimes there was no verbal agreement on the structure of the session and it was left open. This meant that the initial informal ‘chat’ led into a warm-up that turned into unstructured dancing and playing music. Although the session may have had no verbally agreed structure, there was still an unspoken physical agreement, which constituted the grounds for dancing together in shared time and space. And although the meeting may have seemed

¹⁹ For further reading on the use of score in improvisation see Forti’s *Animate Dancing: A practice in Dance Improvisation*, (Forti 2003 p.53-63) in *Taken By Surprise: a Dance Improvisation Reader*, and also chapter two in *Body, Space, Image* (Tufnell & Crickmay 1990) and *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Goldman 2010).

chaotic to an outsider, it actually was not. There was usually a tacit physical agreement between participants even when there was no score. In the group's meetings it was more often that there was a verbally agreed score than there was not. It reveals how the sessions that were more structured (and involved circle-talk) permitted the unstructured sessions to work really well. Opposition seems key to dance improvisation; here it occurs in the meeting place between the structured and unstructured form of the sessions. The connection between the guided and evolving actions in the dancing reflects on the role of the circle talk, which is similarly both formed and emergent. The circle talk and the verbal agreement on a score was important in feeding the dancing, both at the time of having a circle talk and when it was lacking. This finding illustrates that whatever structures were agreed upon by the group for the dance that followed, the circle talk provided a meta-structure upon which the dancing depended.

The repeated situation of having no stated score and the group's no-leader structure seems to follow that which Novack (1990) observed as characterizing Contact Improvisation. Her ethnographic research revealed particular values that Contact Improvisation embodied as well as revealing the social ideologies of the 1960s and 1970s in the USA. She discusses how traditional gender roles and social hierarchies were rejected (Novack p.11), and therefore how groups with no directors symbolized "an egalitarian community in which everyone cooperated and no one dominated" (Novack p.11). Although Novack's study was a particular ethnographic study conducted in a particular time and place, there are useful links between her observations and my own. Contact Improvisation did occur quite often within our sessions, and the repeated situation where no score and no member dominated the

Wednesday Group echoes some of the characteristics of Contact Improvisation that Novack identified.

The meeting usually ended with another circle talk. This was in a format of participants reflecting back and saying what was just done. A dancer said, “I noticed some beautiful moments today”, someone else said, “I noticed how my decision to go unison²⁰ with others generated so many new ideas for me, which I would like to maybe develop further”. Participants described how they felt, what worked for them, things they observed, things they did or did not enjoy. Ending the process in such a way was very beneficial since it formed a closure to the meeting, a time for people to mentally gather themselves if they needed to, or physically catch their breath before leaving the studio. This was also a time for participants to look back, analyze and reflect on what they have been doing. In this way, participants gave voice to the dancing or music playing and shared any images or narratives that had occupied them during the meeting.

5.5 Agreement through talking and dancing

The act of naming the dancers’ experience involves an interesting tension between the research process and the experience of improvising. It is a tension between ‘knowing’ (naming, analyzing) and ‘not knowing’ (trusting intuition). My own practice has led me to realize the importance of ‘talk’ in a moving context. Through furthering my investigation, I became more and more convinced that participants are seeking to find *agreement*, whether by talking or by dancing. It was not a visible action, but more of an understanding I have gained from my experience

²⁰ Moving in unison means doing the same movement as another, moving as one.

as a participant-observer. As this was an artist-led group that relied on the behavior of members rather than on leadership of a teacher, it seemed that in both spoken and unspoken actions, participants were finding ways to *agree* on what to do and how to do it. When participants talked it was a chance for me to notice specific key words we used and to see if those words could offer helpful insights to and examination of *agreements*. When *agreement* between participants was physical rather than verbal, (i.e. while dancing) it was a chance to notice what was guiding the dancers as they were moving from one situation to another. The process of negotiation that the group went through in order to reach agreement was mirrored in a parallel process of negotiation towards agreement in the dance.

In exploring the notion of *agreeing*, this study benefited from the writing of Drid Williams on the anthropology of human movement (Williams 2004). Her research offers the chance to think about the structures and meanings that might emerge in a dance event. While Williams takes a structuralist approach to interpreting and analyzing human behavior (she analyses the dance as an object to be deconstructed and identifies its constituent parts), I adopt an embodied participant-observation approach when investigating and I am analyzing from within the dance. Nevertheless, Williams' approach is useful in regards to the observation that dancers constantly work to *agree*, because applying her theory to my findings helped to explore the mechanism of the meeting as a cultural event.

Williams views dance as “a structured system of meaningful human actions” (p.138), and humanity as a self-defining species that creates the cultures in which it exists (Williams p.151). From this view emerge terms such as “meaning makers”, “role creators” and “rule followers” (Williams 2004), which, in my study help to define and examine the actions of those within the field. I could then see that in

agreeing with each other, participants created meaning, roles and rules through talking and moving actions. This was true in a social behavior type of situations as well as in more practical dance situations. A social situation, for example, was that if someone came to the meeting with an idea for everyone to do for that day, the suggestion needed to be accepted by the others before the group adopted it. Another example for an agreement in a social situation is that members would normally seek out others' permission to invite a new person to join the meetings. Moreover, participants would never leave the meeting before it ended, which meant that when we were dancing we knew who we were dancing with and people were committed to the work and so would not just disappear.

There was generally a feeling that people wanted to work together harmoniously rather than to contradict each other, and these were unspoken rules that everyone seemed to follow. On a physical level, there was often a sense of a shared understanding between members so that if, for example, I was moving in a certain way someone might have come voluntarily and joined the quality of my movement, and I would probably accept this by making eye contact or an approving touch. Another example for a physical agreement situation is that sometimes the group would spontaneously and without speaking build a theme of everyone focusing on a certain rhythm or step and it would develop and grow until it would overlap with a new discovery. Moreover, there was a general sensitivity to an understanding that an improviser needs to know when to stick with a movement idea and when to move on to the next one.

The verbal and physical *agreements* between participants revealed some particular modes of enacting dance improvisation. I recognized the action of *agreeing* as a common guiding principle that dancers used in their practice. Williams' approach

helped me see that talk opportunities supported practice-based principles such as *agreeing*. I was able to see that by talking and listening to each other we made explicit our affirmation of the value of *agreeing* as part of the practice.

5.7 Thought-strategy of responding

The physical focus and the thought-strategies emerged sufficiently clearly in dance improvisation for me to be able to name them ‘methods of moving’ and ‘methods of thinking’. These methods are not pre-determined by the dancers, however I suggest giving a structure to the inherent process of improvisation. The important integration between the two modes, seemed to provide the right conditions for dance improvisation. Although the dancers did not discuss these methods explicitly, they seemed to help dancers to choose what to do in their dancing. Within the methods of moving I identified, there were methods such as ‘giving attention to a fluid quality of movement’ and ‘paying attention to breath’. Within the thought-strategies type of methods, similarly to the students’ group (see 4.6), I noticed strategies of accepting uncertainty and trusting intuition. Another thought strategy that emerged from this field was a method of *response*. The dance was often characterized by actions of *responding* to the environment. Dancers did not shut themselves to what happened around them and therefore stayed alert and vigilant. One participant said she ‘*responded* to light and shadow’, another participant said how he was ‘drawn to movements that were distant from where he was’. Dancers kept a continuous dialogue with others in the group as well as a dialogue with their senses by *responding* to what was heard, touched and seen.

In the action of *responding* there was often a tension between doing and not doing. We would frequently try and find a balance between *responding* to and

including another person's activity in our dance, while not losing our own line of thought. It was noticeable that in *responding* dancers were negotiating tensions such as dealing with the similarities and differences between a physical intervention and a physical suggestion, and being responsive but independent. I noticed that dancers were occupied with 'saying yes' to what others around them would physically suggest, while keeping a vital possibility of following their own momentum of thought and 'saying yes' to their *inner talk*.

According to Tufnell and Crickmay, the complexity of working in a group demands dancers to at once be constantly attentive to the ever-changing activity while trying not to be absorbed into it (Tufnell & Crickmay 2004, p.72). They clarify the challenge of keeping one's own line of thought when working with others:

It is all too easy to make interventions which cut off another person's ability to respond in their own way, or to give up one's own line of thought in preference to another's.

(p.72)

Another way of *responding* for us was to relate to a memory or to what was danced by ourselves and by others. By responding to previous actions, in the form of repeating them or relating to them, dancers can relate to what they sense around them. I named this action *citing*, as this is a way to make reference to or effectively quote someone's movements. Dancers are then able to move back and forth from what they do in the present to what they remember and want to *cite*. By referring to previous movements, the Wednesday Group dancers created a sense that there is something recognizable in what they see and experience. *Responding* by ways of recognizing and repeating was meaningful as it contributed to how dancers physically *agreed* with those they danced with.

5.7 Thought-strategy of simultaneous focus

Another thought-strategy I have identified through the analysis revealed how dancers found a balance between *responding* and tuning-in. Dancers seemed to be using a *simultaneous focus*, a focus that was both internal and external, as they were paying attention to themselves and to others. According to Kaplan, it makes sense to team up the interior and exterior in improvisation because of what she calls "... the tandem nature of solitude and union" (Kaplan 2003 p.217). The dual focus of 'in' and 'out' can explain what was sometimes witnessed and experienced in the field. I noticed that there was a sense of union and respect as dancers were aware of each other's work and related to all that surrounded them. Nonetheless, alongside this awareness was a sense of individuals finding their own place in the group and manifesting this place in their body by dancing in their own unique way.

The terms 'internal' and 'external' were familiar to dancers in the group and the distinction between the two was acknowledged within the common verbal exchange in the meetings as well as within the actual studio practice. Participants related to the idea of 'internal focus' when saying things such as how they were "in their own little world" and "feeling the body from within". Participants related to the idea of 'external focus' when offering to work on 'ensemble practice' that connected the group as a whole, and as one participant said "I felt like I am getting energy from everyone".

The two focuses – internal and external – are another example of the opposition and the place where improvisation happens. They seemed to always be present in the practice, and what emerged was a *simultaneous focus*. When applying the idea of *simultaneous focus* to the other findings from this study, it appears to also be relevant

to *talk rituals* in dance improvisation. The participants' *simultaneous focus* supports the *inner talk* concept (see 4.6), and thereby sheds further light on how information is processed in dance improvisation. Many of the dancers that shared their 'internal and external focus' ideas with others in the Wednesday Group, actually told us something about how they work, and what they pay attention to in their dancing. One dancer told the group, "I used the same work we did with a partner (which included giving different kinds of touch such as a pat, a brush and a squeeze) on different surfaces such as the floor, the air and the wall". Another dancer said, "When I get stuck with deciding what to do next I change dynamics by going faster or slower, or pause to wait for a new desire to arrive". There was a clear link between what the dancer from this last example said and how she improvised, and her words clarified her moving for me. Another dancer said "if you don't know what sort of movement you need now, just have a guess." In this way, they shared what it is that might direct them in making choices of what to do in dancing. When dancers talked to each other in the session, they were manifesting their inner experience and naming their knowledge, thus sharing some thought strategies and methods such as what I have identified as *simultaneous focus*.

5.8 The relation between *talk rituals*, thought-strategies and dancing.

Agreeing, responding, citing, and focusing are modes of action in the dance that are seen here as thought-strategies and as providing shared narratives among dance practitioners. *Talk rituals* support these action modes by helping to make them explicit and affirming their value to the practice. Opportunities to talk allow something that is internalized to have some external 'voicing'.

The dancers find some meaning in what they are doing because of the *inner talk*. The *inner talk* leads to particular kinds of dancing, which can then be actually voiced in the circle-talk; which then feeds back into the *inner talk* and together they create a 'virtuous circle'. In other words, the cycle is: dancers' *inner talk* informs the moving; movement is particular and meaningful; the dancing and *inner talk* are then voiced in a talk opportunity; which then returns to a boosted and enhanced *inner talk* to complete the circle. Therefore the cycle changes the dancers' *inner talk* and hence changes the moving.

On one occasion when there was no agreed score, one of the dancers said in the ending circle-talk "I noticed how for me everything today was related to the Underscore categories like 'grazing' 'skinesphere' and 'pow-wow'". In this example, the dancer's *inner talk* was fed and informed by a previous meeting where we were led through the Underscore (see 4.2). Her interest informed her dancing and she reflected on it in the ending circle-talk. In another no-score meeting a dancer said, "I was aware today of us as an ensemble" and referred to Adam Benjamin's writing about this subject.²¹ Again, it is interesting to see that this dancer refers to a previous Wednesday Group meeting. The previous experience benefited her *inner talk* and therefore fed her dancing. These examples also demonstrate the embodied structures that the dancers brought 'with them' through their training backgrounds.

In the students' group the cycle was similar but slightly different – Walker's words informed the moving, the students found meaning in dance and voiced it in talking opportunities, which fed back into the students' *inner talk*. In this way,

²¹ This dancer referred to Benjamin's exercises on ensemble qualities from knowledge of his book (Benjamin 2002) as well as participating in Benjamin's workshop. In the following meeting, this specific dancer offered to lead the group through the mentioned exercises.

Walker's verbal input is located in the 'talk-dance cycle' together with the students' *inner talk* (see appendix 3).

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter has described and analyzed the activity of the Wednesday Group as an artist-led professional dance improvisation group. Firstly, it recognized another *talk ritual*, which is the pre-moving informal chat. The initial informal chat promoted participants' sense of belonging, both to the group and to the wider practice and showed that the group's wealth of experience derived from and indicated a wider context of improvisational practice. Secondly, the chapter examined situations where there was no agreed score to lead the dancing. It revealed that although there was no circle-talk to set a verbal structure, there was still an unspoken physical agreement, which constituted the grounds for dancing together in shared time and space. It shows how the sessions that involved circle-talk and were more structured permitted the unstructured sessions to work really well. Opposition seems key to dance improvisation; here it occurs in the meeting place between the structured and unstructured form of the sessions. The analysis demonstrates the role of the circle talk and reflects on the way it informs the dance, and provides a meta-structure that effectively holds the dance that follows and any subsequent talk.

The chapter has also explored the guiding principles and thought strategies that dancers use in their practice. It has revealed that dancers constantly work to find *agreements* (physical and verbal) and that by *agreeing* with each other, participants created meaning, roles and rules for the group. By providing examples for physical and social agreement situations, I was able to show that talking and listening to each

other affirms the value of *agreeing* as part of the practice and makes it explicit. I have also identified more thought strategies and have specifically focused on ways of *responding*, *citing* and having a *simultaneous focus* of attention to internal and external occurrences. A close reading of what guides and shapes the activity sheds further light on how information is processed in dance improvisation.

Finally, I have recognized a series of *talk ritual*, each of which has specific characteristics and are important in different ways. Collectively, these give rise to what characterizes dance improvisation as a unique form and practice. Consequently, 'chat', circle-talk and *inner talk* are all types of *talk rituals* that are applied in the practice. Recognizing these types of talk in both field studies demonstrates how embedded they are in the practice. By identifying the connections between these types of talk I have proposed that they effectively construct a cyclical structure to demonstrate the link between *talk rituals*, thought-strategies and dancing. Because talk opportunities allow an internalized experience to be externally 'voiced', the *inner talk* informs how the dancers move, which can then be voiced in the circle-talk; which then feeds back into the *inner talk* and together create a 'virtuous circle'. Examples from my fieldwork shows that the cycle returns to an enhanced *inner talk*, that therefore changes the moving. I show that the cycle benefits the dancers as it informs their dancing and enriches their talking. This cyclical process relates to what I observed in the student group, which suggested the presence of a similar cycle, where Walker's verbal input was located within the 'talk-dance cycle' together with the students' *inner talk*.

Chapter Six - Conclusion

My principal aim in this project was to investigate how movement and words combine to reveal what is particular about the practice of dance improvisation. My main focus has been on the words that the dancers speak as they reflect on their dancing; before, during and after the dance. This focus emerged because of my interest in the different kinds of talk that dancers engage in, and how these might be identified and named. Through identifying these talk types I wanted to discover more about improvisation as a social action, how meaning is generated through improvisation and how the different talk types reveal more about the structural properties of dance improvisation. The structure of the thesis and the methods I followed proceeded with these aims in mind.

In chapter one I described the overall aims of the thesis and marked out the territory of the study. I was particularly interested in 21st century dance improvisation in Western culture, where dancers use the practice for training and as an artist-development process. It is here that I argue for my focus on naturally occurring reflective talk in the practice that specifically happens before, after and around the dance rather than within it. Having the benefit of my background and involvement in dance improvisation, I recognised that it would be fruitful to spend time observing and participating in two different dance workshop series to explore the dancers' experience in dance improvisation practice. This gave me an intimate perspective on what happens while improvising and when dancers talk about improvising. It allowed me to investigate the extent to which the words that are used in improvised dance feed the movement itself, both for the individual dancer and as a collective process.

To situate the study, I constructed a contextual overview of talk activities within dance improvisation in chapter two, firstly by examining how dance improvisation has developed over time. My analysis revealed that dance improvisation was not identified as a unique dance practice within dance literature until the 1960s and most writing is generated through the activities of those who practice, rather than an examination of the practice from a detached theoretical point of view. Writing about dance improvisation therefore emerged mainly by first-hand experience of the writer-practitioners. By tracking different writers' experiences, I have argued that the knowledge in dance improvisation is generated through oral and embodied transmission. It is the oral aspect of dance improvisation that prompted my interest in dancers' talk in improvisation. The custom of transmitting oral knowledge on dance improvisation can be seen as an *oral tradition*, which is significant in how the practice is taught and practiced. Communicating about dance improvisation and passing on knowledge points at the importance of 'talk' in dance improvisation, a theme that I developed in later chapters.

The contextual review also pointed to the shifts in the way in which dance has developed over time as improvisation has gathered interest and offered an alternative to the paradigm of dance training that emphasizes the reproduction of the teacher's style and steps. The growing recognition of improvisation and its value for dancers also led to a rethinking of what virtuosity means in dance. Those skilled in improvisation began to be recognized as virtuosic performers,

My focus has always been on improvising as distinct practice rather than as a tool for devising set movement. I have also purposefully located the focus on talk activities as one strategy for reflecting on dance and I have situated the study in the

realms of talk activities that are naturally occurring in a dance practice/learning content. While the emphasis in my study is on ‘talk’, there is little evidence of ‘talking’ in the literature because ‘voicing’ is not the same as ‘wording’. Voicing (talking) is immediate, instant and unedited whereas writing tends to be more formed and artist/writers shape their reflections through writing. So unless an artist’s talk is directly quoted, there is little research into dancers’ talk available in established literature. Consequently, my focus led to the decision to draw on ethnographic processes to deepen my study and in Chapter three I review the value of employing qualitative, post-positivist methods.

I identified participant observation as a suitable method for researching dance improvisation and in doing so I made clear that my approach was to privilege the voice of the participants over my own in the context of the reflexive aspects of the method. I acknowledged that my own background as a dance practitioner and specifically my training in Eshkol-Wachman notation system, was relevant to the way in which I observed movement, demonstrating the way that the researcher’s embodied knowledge is allowed into the study process. I discovered that by trusting my own body as a source of knowledge, as did Sklar (2000), Whatley (2002) and Dils and Crosby (2001) and by participating in the talk activities, I could report and process the complex dialogue between the myriad voices of the field. I have attempted to outline my data-collection methods and my approach to the fieldwork, such that others could reproduce the methods. To examine the field I developed a research technique that included intervals of dancing, writing, listening while in the field, and later documenting and reflecting that allowed me to draw out links and identify patterns of verbal expression in connection to the movement.

By discussing my methodology and the background to ‘talk’ in dance improvisation I was able to establish a foundation for the next two chapters (chapters four and five) that described and analyzed data from a group of Coventry University undergraduate dance students and an artist-led group of professional dancers and musicians, the *Wednesday Group*. In chapter four, my analysis drew out the links between talking and improvising in a learning environment by offering examples of students’ talk in conjunction with their dance.

My analysis has drawn attention to some important core values and methods that are used in the process of acquiring improvisational skills in dance. The core values include; relying on intuition for decision-making, challenging oneself by aiming to become more aware and present, and privileging movement that is personal and displays individuality rather than movement that is familiar and habitual. I have also defined several pedagogical methods such as teaching through example or by demonstrating in class (but not to ask for imitation), and the teacher’s verbal input in response to the students’ moving as it emerges.

Importantly, I have discovered that there are several talk types that naturally occur in class, both before and after dancing, which are repeated and expected, and I term these *talk rituals*. The rituals I identified were peer-group discussions (circle-talk) in the beginning and end of class, and constructed chats (in pairs) that were woven through the class. I found that dancers employ another *talk ritual*, which I argue is a more tacit and soundless strategy. I have named it *inner talk* and argue that dancers employ an inner decision-making process to guide their actions whilst dancing. As a participant-observer in class I was contemplating my own internal creative process experience as well as listening carefully for students’ comments on their experiences. As the *inner talk* was ‘under the surface’ I could only discover it

through my own embodied experience and hindsight attention to the underlying importance in dancers' reports. Through this process, I found that Walker demonstrated her own *inner talk* in the words she shared in class. Walker's words played a central role within the talk activities in dance improvisation. As teacher she was both 'inside' and 'outside' the dancing but her talk was significant in feeding the students' dancing, in establishing the themes and in supporting the students' ability to reflect on the dance. I can therefore agree with Steve Paxton that "...improvisation could not be taught, though it could be learnt" (Paxton 2003 p.179), His words seem to describe the way Walker supported the students' learning in the class because of her facilitation methods.

While chapter four looked at the ways in which a particular group of pre-professionals acquire their knowledge of dance improvisation, chapter five turned to examine the ways in which similar knowledge is communicated and exercised in a group of experienced dance practitioners²². Another *talk ritual* was revealed in this chapter, it is a pre-moving informal chat. One of the discoveries in this chapter was that *talk rituals* such as chatting and circle-talk promoted participants' sense of belonging, both to the group and to the wider practice and showed that the group's wealth of experience derived from and indicated a wider context of improvisational practice.

Other discoveries regarded the guiding principles and thought-strategies that dancers use in their practice. I found that dancers constantly work to find physical and verbal *agreements* and that by *agreeing* with each other, participants created meaning, roles and rules for the group. By providing examples for physical and social agreement

²² The fieldwork in the educational context occurred in parallel to the other fieldwork.

situations, I was able to show that talking and listening to each other affirms the value of *agreeing* as part of the practice and makes the practice explicit. I also identified more thought-strategies and drew out how dancers specifically focus on ways of *responding*, *citing* and having a *simultaneous focus* of attention to internal and external occurrences. I argue that these constituent elements are key to understanding how information is processed in dance improvisation.

Through my analysis I identified the importance of how the more structured sessions, and those that involved circle-talk, permitted the unstructured sessions to work really well. I showed that participants relied on shared structures such as agreed scores from previous meetings in order for the un-structured elements to exist (such as dancing with no score). This led me to naming an important structural property of dance improvisation; opposition. The opposition that occurred in the meeting place between structured and unstructured form of the sessions made clear that opposition is key to dance improvisation. A second discovery was that because the Wednesday Group dancers were more experienced than the students, and since those meetings were artist-led, their *inner talk* relied more heavily on embodied structures that they brought with them to guide the dancing.

I have proposed a series of *talk rituals* that collectively give rise to what characterizes dance improvisation as a form and practice. Consequently, what I name informal chat, constructed chat, circle-talk and *inner talk* are all types of *talk rituals* that are applied in the practice. Finally, I have put forward a structure to demonstrate the link between *talk rituals*, thought-strategies and dancing. It is a cyclical structure that demonstrates how talk opportunities allow internalized experience to be externally 'voiced'. The *inner talk* leads to particular dancing, which can then be voiced in the circle-talk; which then feeds back into the *inner talk* and together create

a 'virtuous circle' for the improviser. The cycle continues with an enhanced *inner talk* that in turn changes the moving. Therefore, the 'talk-dance cycle' benefits dancers as it informs their dancing and enriches their talking.

The identification of the 'talk-dance cycle' confirms my intuition about the importance of 'talk' as an activity within dance improvisation. *Talk rituals* make the tacit knowledge more explicit for the dancer. Therefore they inform the dancers' understanding and expand their expertise. Structuring and naming the content of *inner talk* in dance improvisation creates a potential tension because of the nature of dance improvisation as an un-codified system. Nevertheless, having the desire to share the tacit knowledge of dance improvisation I argue that although talking might label experiences it allows attention to be paid to experience. Although dance improvisation is primarily practiced in the studio, and privileges the body moving without the accompaniment of words, it is nonetheless dependent on the effectiveness of an oral culture in both pedagogical and professional settings.

This study has developed my own understanding of both dance improvisation practice and the importance of reflection. It has helped me to position my work within a wider context, to acquire evaluative skills and to realize the thought-strategies that guide my dancing and perhaps penetrate into my everyday life. From an academic point of view, this research can be useful and relevant for those who facilitate improvisation practice, for dance students, and more generally for those who study methods and theories in education.

Future study

There are a number of potential future applications of this research. The study examined talk customs that were like a nature, or were ‘natural’ to the dancers, particularly *talk rituals* in dance improvisation. This shows that the knowledge in dance improvisation is transmitted (also) through talk using an oral culture of passing on and ‘picking up’ a collection of skills and methods – not only physical techniques but also, and perhaps mainly, cognitive skills. This discovery offers a way of thinking about the place of words in other types of dance. In a future study it might be possible to explore, perhaps through an ethnographic process, verbal customs in different dance styles (such as in Ballet and African dancing), in other modes of dance practices (such as in learning dance repertory, choreographic practices and in rehearsals),²³ as well as in different dance education settings (such as within postgraduate research and in community dance).

Another possible focus for future study would be to further develop this study’s findings of the importance of words within educational settings in a physical context (such as in sports education). Possible lines of inquiry could be to explore whether the oral features of dance improvisation could be of any value to another education system (such as primary school education). It would be interesting to find out whether the British education system sees the importance of having activities that involve a word-movement connection, and whether school teachers are aware of the interrelation between spoken and embodied knowledges in a physical education

²³ In this context it is worth noting that deLahunta and Barnard (2005) researched choreographic thinking tools by applying cognitive neuroscience knowledge to in dance making processes.

context, and potentially in other contexts as well. Recent educational researchers, Robinson (2001) and Greenland (2000) recommend ways of rethinking children's education (see 4.8). Future study might investigate how aware school teachers are of giving verbal attention to movement experiences and whether learning to give such attention will affect children's sense of ownership of what they learn.

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Appendix 1 – Consent form

-1-

March 2009

Naama Spitzer

MA research performing arts student

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

For all year 3 students, Wednesday Group participants, and involved tutors:

Name of participant:

For the purpose of my research as a student in Coventry University, I would like your permission to use the data I collect as a participant – observer. This will culminate in a written thesis and possibly other future publications. The study will ask a number of questions about the experience of dance practitioners to assess the implications for teaching, learning and practicing group improvisational dance.

The overall aim is to examine how practical skill development in dance improvisation is taught and used by students studying dance at undergraduate level and by other dance practitioners; and specifically how interior improvisation

techniques are used to inform the decision making of the dancer in a group. The study is concerned with the behaviour of the practitioners and thereby seeks to learn about the dance form through the practitioners' actions.

My research will mainly rely on data collected through participating in various year 3 classes and in the Wednesday Improvisation Group that meet weekly in ICE, during Sep 2008-Dec 2009.

The project will focus on how dancers' experience is applied to the practice of improvisation. Our experience of how we practice improvisation, how we reflect on our own or others' learning and how we experience being part of a group in that learning, will provide very useful information for this research. The written study might also be of benefit to you, to assist you in your work and development in dance improvisation practice as well as providing you with the opportunity to contribute to original research that uses the ethnographic approach of a participant-observer to explore this art form.

As a student or practitioner:

I seek your permission to use the observational notes I make in classes/Wednesday group meetings for my research. In all cases, observations will not be attributed to you without your specific permission. Overall, this study will not quote or refer to students or practitioners by name unless a specific permission is given.

-2-

As a Tutor:

I seek your permission to use any observational notes I make in classes for my research, and your agreement for me to use your name as a tutor. I shall not quote you without your specific permission.

In addition to that set out above, **my commitment** to you is as follows:

I will endeavour to ensure that matters that may be regarded as personal are handled sensitively.

I will be honest and open in how the research is progressing and will inform you of any changes or alterations to the study at the earliest opportunity.

If for any reason you decide to withdraw your agreement to allow me observing you individually at work as part of my research - you are free to do so and without prejudice.

Signed.....

(Naama Spitzer)

AGREEMENTS BY THE PARTICIPANT

I have read the above and I am happy to participate in the research.

Signed.....

I give consent for any observations of my participation to be used for the purposes of this research and any publication or other dissemination method resulting from this research.

Signed.....

I am happy to be part of this research on a voluntary basis.

Signed.....

Appendix 2– Notebook Samples

In order to show how I work and draw out the links between improvisation and ‘talk’, the following demonstrates how my note taking stimulated the thinking process. The following are examples of ‘talk’ I recorded in improvisation sessions. When it is a verbatim report of what the class leader or participants said I use an underline, when it is my own original annotation I use *italics*, when it is an analysis of the notes I use regular characters.

31-10-08 – Third year class with Lucia Walker

From notes: “*Partner work – move up against pressure. What makes it easy/hard? Find structure, ground. Let pressure increase the will to go up. Expand into space. Float down. Can spiral on way down. Stay square on the way up. Hands read the lightness of journey down.*”

Lucia fed the imagery while we danced, which supported the movement. Listening to her helped me find fluidity and clarity within the collaboration with a partner.

12-12-08 – Third year class with Lucia Walker

From the notes: “*Entrances and exits: Round robin of solo-duet-solo and so on... Soft body, melting, inner strength, go with desire, does not have to be fair! (People can go for another solo...). Lucia quoted one of Nancy Stark-Smith sayings – if you don’t know when is the right time to enter, enter in the wrong time.”*

The term Round Robin stands for a common Contact Improvisation structure that serves as a clear starting point and it usually intentionally develops into a blur towards the end. In Round Robin a

given number of group members (in this example 1-2-1 and so on) improvise while others form a circle around them. It was interesting to see how Lucia's words had an immediate impact on the students. After Lucia said it, most of the students were a bit braver in entering the circle for an improvisation. In this way the spoken words evoked a response of daringness and courage in this specific improvisation situation that intimidated some of the students.

12-3-09 Wednesday Group

From the notes: "Pick up 3 words. Use them as source material. Timed writing on it. Reading it to each other in the circle. The mind makes the connections between the words. We dance. We support each other's image, and initiate own. C. shows me his imaginary creature that lives in the ceiling behind the holes. I show him the sea that I see".

Although this is not an example of 'talk' that emerges naturally through the activity but rather a task to stimulate dance, it led to more talk as suggested by our shared stories. The narrative we shared with the partner and with the group generated the improvisation.

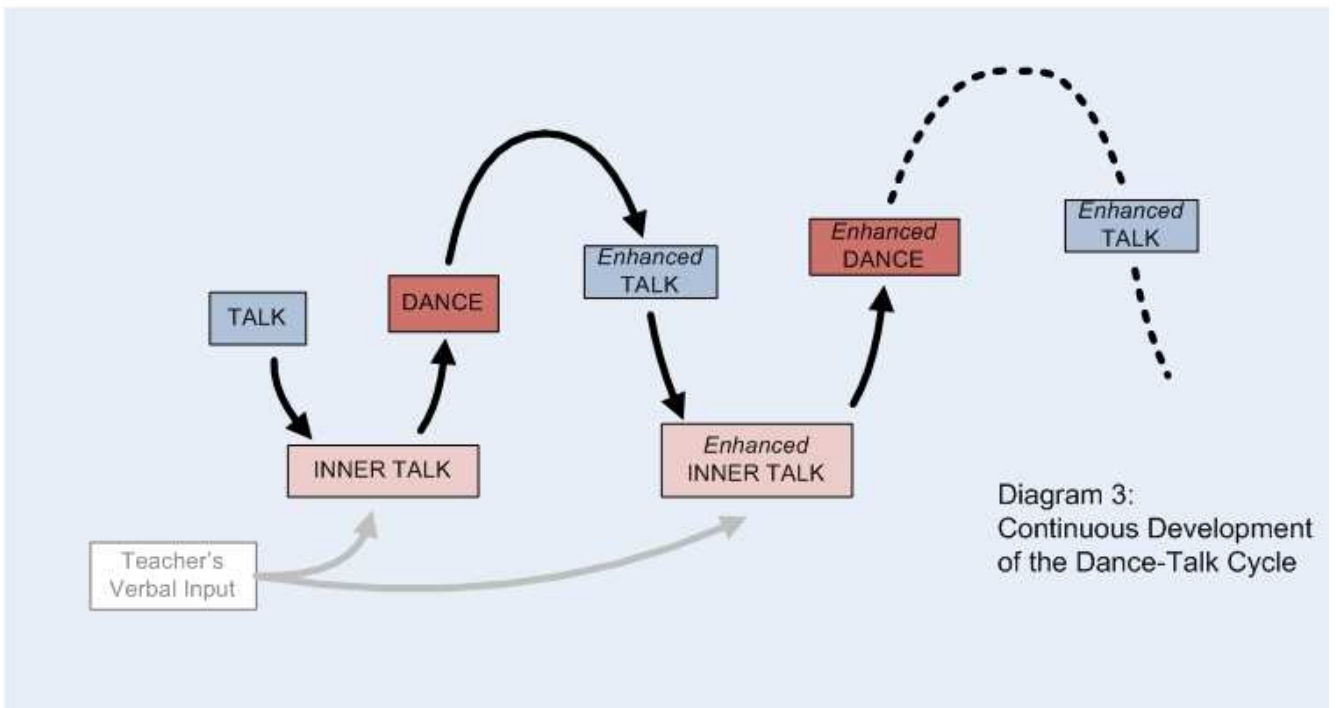
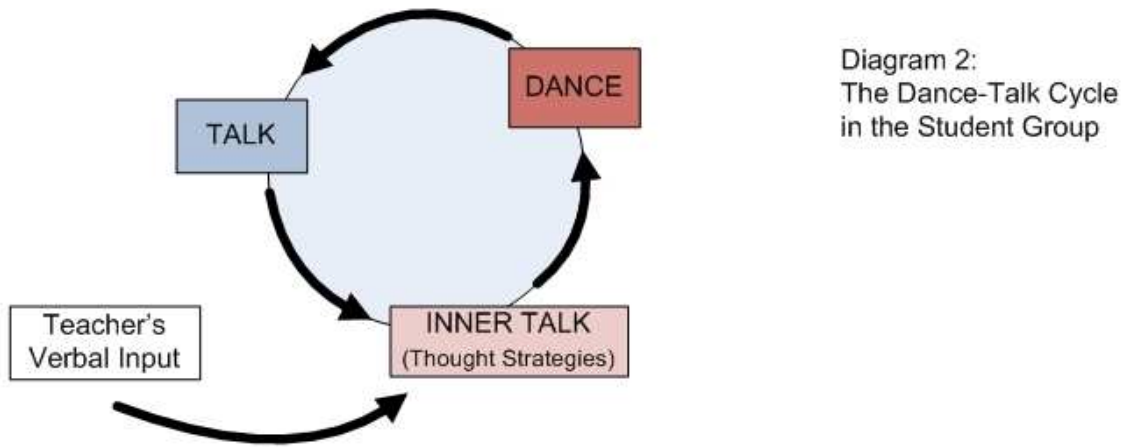
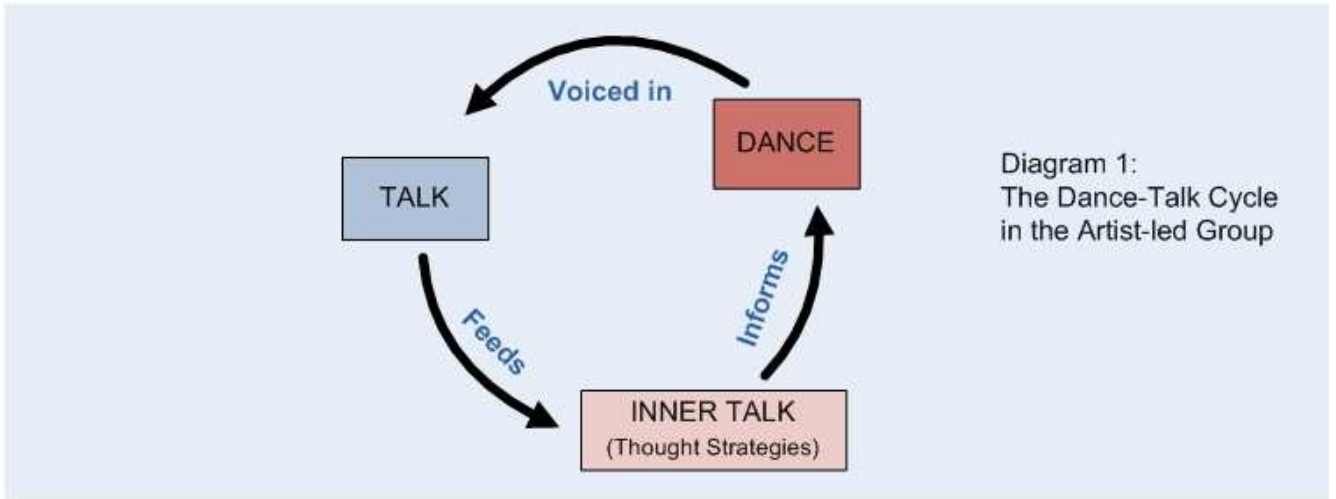
20-3-09 Workshop with Rosemary Lee (for third year and staff)

"Lets try something...What does it take to be present? It helps to stomp, to say 'I'm here!' with the body. We took that to use in improvisation, travel forward in a long flat line. There is a shared attention. She talks about groups, sense of loosing each other, finding each other".

In this example we were guided to voice our presence in a certain way, as if there were some unseen shared subtitles to the dance. The directed *inner talk* elicited individual variations of group-improvised movement that had a shared focus. Rosemary's specific workshop was defined as a choreographic lab and hence

improvising was for the purpose of dance making rather than for the sake of practice. While my research focuses on spoken words that tacitly feed the moving, Rosemary's words here demonstrate a 'talk' that explicitly states an intention. These specific words led us all to move in a shared yet specific way, the movement relied on the words.

Appendix 3: Diagrams



Conditions

the involvement of the talk ritual in dance improvisation

what is an improvisation event?

Dance Improvisation
Spoken + Moving
Language / organizing structure

role:
to seek agreement
↓
non visible action

Values:
Sack + forth
citing from previous actions
not shut to environment
alertness
vigilance
dialogue with others, sensations etc...
doubled focus (internal + external)
Originality: preference to unfamiliar movements

Thought Strategies / Intentions

Physical Principles

the choices improvisers make from what guides them when moving another.
to fluency of movement
to breath
Skeletal awareness

experiential + cultural

technical

Interconnection of the body responsive body

methods / skills (how to do it?)

researched by movement analysis: setting organizing principles

explored by actions (execution)

tasks → exercise
scores → find out difference
warm up → set of tasks/decisions
circle talks → verbal reflection on moving

guided

evolving

spontaneous internal explorations

performed with audience in mind

Outcomes

the conditions are the context for the outcomes

Oct. 09
Naama Spitzer