Teaching Improvisation in the Context of a Professional Contemporary Dance Education

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This seminar paper is divided into three parts. Following this introduction and explanation of research methods, in part one I give some background information on improvisation, contemporary dance and my own dance education. In part two, I describe how I structured and taught the course around which this seminar is centred. In part three, I evaluate this course both from my own perspective and in dialogue with the students’ feedback.

Introduction

My research seminar paper concerns on an improvisation course that I taught to a group of 12 first year BA contemporary dance students at The Theatre Academy, Helsinki (TEAK) in Autumn 2008. My background in dance can best be described as alternative, more accurately as post-modern.¹ My interest and education was focused on somatic² exploration and improvisation. The TEAK BA contemporary dance education has been characterised as more mainstream, as has the background of the students. So my arrival to teach this group had a little of the character of two worlds colliding.

At my first meeting with the students, I asked how many of them had studied improvisation before and they all responded affirmatively. However, it quickly became clear that we were referring to very different things. After the first couple of awkward classes, in which both we struggled with each other, a fruitful and creative exchange developed during which I had many insights into improvisation and teaching improvisation, and, from the dialogue in the classes, I believe the students did too.

The course consisted of three two hour 15 minute classes every week for six weeks I also had the possibility to invite a musician to accompany the class once a week. Since the school offers the opportunity for Friday lunchtime performances, I suggested that the students might perform a demonstration performance for an audience at the end of the course. Not only did this give us something to work towards, but also created another very distinct learning opportunity.

I have been teaching improvisation for the last 13 years but have never documented the process. A self-taught teacher, I never make written class plans, only rough mental
plans. One reason is that since what I teach revolves around physicality and the body, I carry the body of knowledge upon which I draw, and that I developed as the result of my studies and research, with me everywhere I go. Literally. It never seemed necessary. Another is that I prefer to improvise my way through a class or a course, which renders planning redundant. I am in the habit of tracking the students’ interests and following my own, adapting to the mood and energy level of individuals, the group as a whole, and myself, as they shift from moment to moment. To give one banal but concrete example, it’s a very different experience to teach, and for the students to learn, this work that addresses their whole being at nine o’clock on cold dark mid-Winter Monday morning than on Thursday afternoon on a bright warm day in May. Of course, I have built up a repertoire of exercises, but my focus is not so much on teaching them as continuing to explore them. I don’t feel like the material that I teach is external to me, I feel rather that the knowledge is simply there within me. In the act of teaching, it organises itself in response to the situation, often in new and surprising ways. There is always a difference between classes, sometimes more and sometimes less.

Research methods and questions
The nature of improvisation is paradoxical in that while the experience of the work is utterly concrete, that experience is at the same time highly subjective. This subjectivity is foregrounded both in the students as they engage in exploring the work, and in myself as I observe them in the role of teacher. This is due in part to the holistic nature of the somatic premise upon which my teaching is premised. The body of knowledge that the student uncovers is their own, just as the body of knowledge from which I teach is mine.

In considering the research methodology to employ, the first consideration was simply, what is the point of the research? For me it is clearly to support the development of my work and myself as a teacher of it. The subjective/holistic nature of the work, in tandem with my intention to use the research for myself, pointed towards a qualitative approach to any analysis of this research. The closest model that I found for this was reflexive inquiry since it recognises that teaching is in itself an act of research and one which is rooted in the personal, both in terms of subjective observation and autobiographical reflection.

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The \textit{better we understand ourselves as teachers, the better we understand ourselves as persons, and vice versa. Because we see the practice of teaching as an expression as who we are as individuals – that is an autobiographical expression – we assert that to}\]
understand teaching in its complex, dynamic and multidimensional forms, we need to engage in ongoing autobiographical inquiry. (Cole & Knowles, 2000; p15)

Reflexive inquiry encourages subjective evaluation of the material which makes use of the inherent human capacity for pattern recognition, the same capacity which I am exploring, albeit in another mode, when teaching improvisation.

As stated in the introduction, my tendency in teaching is not to order things externally before class, but to rely on my “body of knowledge” in the act of teaching. I am however in the habit of writing detailed post-class notes in which I record not only what we did but any other thoughts or associations that arise out of the class. I find the act of writing to be useful, and sometimes I use these notes as references; I like to check back and see the order in which I taught things on a course or how I taught particular exercises, and it can also be very useful as a freelancer when returning to the same group of students after a long break simply to remember what I have previously covered. In this context however, in making my post-class notes, I also reflected on my reasons for choosing my material, how I presented it, how the students responded to it physically and verbally, locating its source or any references which informed it, and noting any other associated thoughts that arose in the act of making the notes.

I am curious how my relationship to written documentation changes in the shift from personal note keeping to something to be shared with others. How possible it is to present my work in written form to others. Do the extra steps involved in the act of preparing it to share with others offer something back to the process of teaching or to the material itself?

And I am also curious to know how the students received the work that I did with them. What did they learn from the course? Did their view of improvisation change? Were they able to make use of anything that I taught them in different contexts? How did what I did with them fit into the larger context of their ongoing education so far?

I gave the students a questionnaire at the end of the course hoping to hear from them their thoughts on the course and reflections on what they had learned. Unfortunately, few replied. Instead, I was able to arrange to meet with the whole group at the beginning of their second semester to speak with them together.

In part two of this seminar paper, I describe and reflect on my process of teaching and putting together the course. In part three, I evaluate the course both from my own perspective and in dialogue with the data that I was able to gather from the students, and finally I will reflect upon the whole writing process.
Part One: Background

What do we mean by improvisation and how can it be taught?

Improvisation is a term which means many different things to many different people. In the world of jazz music, the ability to improvise is regarded as a fundamental skill which is treasured and savoured in both live and recorded performances of the most highly regarded exponents of the art. At the other end of the scale, improvisation is held to be the natural refuge of the lazy and ill-prepared: “Okay, so you didn’t get around to working on it. Well, then I guess you’ll have to improvise.” Viewed from another angle, this same ill-preparedness can re-cast the improviser in a heroic light. In many action and disaster movies the hero/heroine, presented with an unprecedented and seemingly insurmountable situation, is forced to improvise a solution.

Improvisation is also simply mundane. It is ever present. In a conversation I overheard between two students entering one of my classes midway through a three-week intensive improvisation workshop: “It’s like we’re improvising all the time. I mean, when I got up this morning I knew I was coming here, but I didn’t know exactly how I’d get here. And I didn’t know that we’d meet on the way. And even if I did, then I’d have had no way of predicting what we’d be talking about right now.”

Improvisation has something to do with creativity. The dictionary definition of the verb to improvise is to: “create and perform spontaneously or without preparation … to produce or make (something) from whatever is available.” (New Oxford American Dictionary, 2005) No matter how codified and set the performance of some task has become, from weaving a basket to baking a cake, from playing a song to dancing a ballet, someone at some point “improvised” whatever that later became set as the pattern, the recipe, the tune or the choreography. It was improvised into being.

Improvisation is then intimately connected with composition. Improvisation is the process of investigation, through playing with combinations of elements, that results in the making of a composition. One could even say that that act improvising is the act of making a composition. This perhaps is a clue as to why improvisation might be interesting
to explore as a performance mode in itself and why some performers of dance improvisation even prefer to refer to their work as “Instant Composition”\(^4\). Besides side-stepping possible negative connotations of the word improvisation that abound in the dance world, making this connection to composition suggests the possibility of being able to study and teach improvisation. Great improvisers do not simply appear out of nowhere.

As David Gere states in his introduction to *Taken by Surprise*:

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\text{“Virtually all improvisation takes place upon a firm foundation of training and practice – think of J. S. Bach’s public improvisations on the organ – through which a vocabulary of conventions and possible variations is committed to movement memory and deeply explored.” (Albright & Gere, 2003; p xv)}
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For the dancer, the field of study is their relationship with their own body (their instrument as it were) and the compositional relationships through space and time to their environment and others co-existing within it. Entering into the open-ended process of fine-tuning the perception of these internal and external relationships is the essence the study of improvisation. If composition can be summed up as making choices on how to combine elements, then our perception is what presents us with the elements from which to choose. The more fine-grained the perception, the more elements from which we can choose and the more subtlety we can employ in combining them.

This intimate connection with composition suggests the necessity for improvisation in the making of dances. It is present as choreographers improvise alone in the studio to come up with set sequences to teach to their dancers and in the act of teaching those set sequences to their dancers in fine-tuning the movements to fit their dancers. It is present in more task-based choreographies where the the choice-making role is given over to the dancers themselves, and there are also many instances of choreographies which include structured improvisations. And, of course, it is most clearly visible in the performer who chooses to step out on to an open stage and improvise live in front of an audience.

From the virtuoso performer of improvisation through to all of us as we make our way through our days, the twin threads connecting these different enactions of improvisation are perception and choice making. The study of improvisation is the study of perception and choice making and, in the widest sense, improvisation is simply a life skill.

**Improvisation in contemporary dance**

Improvisation has played a part in contemporary dance performance since its inception although the role and value of it has changed with the times. Very broadly speaking, at
the beginning it was central in the work of Isadora Duncan (Albright & Gere, 2003; p54-55), then, along the way, dances tended to become more and more set, with the division of role of choreographer and dancer more clearly demarked, and improvisation relegated merely to a way to generate material (Bremser & Jowitt, 1996). Since the 1960s, what has come to be known as post-modern dance started to shake up those roles with improvisation once more finding a role in performance (Banes, 1987).

There are many traditions of dance and their associated pedagogies which co-exist today. The Vaganova Institute in St Petersburg which educates ballet dancers celebrated its 270th anniversary in 2008, while the School For New Dance Development (SNDO) in Amsterdam, which was founded in 1975, offers a “dance maker” education where students are introduced to the many disparate skills necessary to make performances including stage lighting, production skills and video. Currently, the dominant cultural idea of dance is still one of learning and performing set movements. Taking dance classes consisting of set movements is a popular leisure activity both for adults and children and, for many young people, this is the context in which their interest in pursuing a career as a professional dancer is aroused.

Right now in contemporary dance as an art form, as evidenced by the kinds of performances at ImpulsTanz festival in Vienna (the largest festival of contemporary dance in Europe) for example, there tends to be a concern with the physicality, conceptual, a blurring of the roles of choreographer and dancer, and task-based work. In a conversation with the festival’s performance programmer, he said referring to the inclusion of choreographed work of Company Rosas (a company that rose to prominence in the 1980s known for its highly skilled performance of set choreographies) that it was necessary for the festival to include some, “historical repertory”.

Education of contemporary dancers
Whereas the qualities that once would get a dancer noticed might be characterised as a high level of technical virtuosity, strong stage presence and the ability to embody the artistic vision of the choreographer, the qualities these days could be said to be a high level of physical creative problem solving skills (something I call physical intelligence or the ability to think physically), a good level of technical skill, the ability to communicate and collaborate within a group, strong stage presence and, in today’s interconnected world, great networking skills. With current trends in contemporary dance devolving creativity to dancers, I believe that the study of improvisation can support the young dancer’s devel-
opment of the necessary communication and collaborative skills, stage presence and physical intelligence. It can also support the acquisition of technical dance skills although, not being a technical dancer myself, I have no direct experience of this. I base this on what I am told by my peers.

Most often I teach improvisation in contexts where there is already an appreciation of what it might have to offer: either in dance educations which could be described as post-modern where improvisation is an important part of the curriculum. For example, the Movement And Performance Research\(^7\) professional dance education in Outokumpu, Finland, or the Education In Dance And Somatics: Practice, Pedagogy And Cultural Creativity\(^8\) at ISLO in Joensuu Finland; or else in open workshops at dance centres or in festivals where the participants sign-up themselves.

Given that young students’ arrival into a contemporary dance education is mostly through more conventional dance classes and their exposure to contemporary dance as an art form may be limited, to introduce the study of improvisation in the context of a more traditional contemporary dance education presents an interesting challenge. My own background, both how I became interested in dance and how I became a teacher, is very different from this.

**My background as a movement teacher**

I can trace the roots of what I do now to the dual discovery in November 1991, when I was 27 and studying at a circus and performing arts school\(^9\) of two different somatic movement disciplines: the Feldenkrais Method and Contact Improvisation. A year later, a two-week dance improvisation workshop with Mary Fulkerson\(^10\) set me on my current path. I had previously worked regularly as a journalist among other things and had a history of childhood movement problems that had persisted into my teens and early 20s. These discoveries opened a way that eventually led to me becoming professionally involved in postmodern dance and a wider range of somatic movement techniques.

I spent two years (1993-95) studying at the School For New Dance Development (SNDO) where Body Mind Centering (BMC) was the somatic discipline that underpinned studies in dance and performance. BMC consists of two basic areas of study: developmental movement and experiential anatomy (Cohen *et al.*, 1993). These two areas are however by no means exclusive to BMC. Many of the post-modern release techniques build on an anatomical understanding leading back to the seminal work by Mabel Todd
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(Todd, 1937) via Barbara Clark (Matt & Clark, 1993), John Rolland (Rolland, 1987) and Andre Bernard (Bernard et al, 2006).

In subsequent years, I made an ongoing study of experiential anatomy, both within the discipline of BMC and with specialist teachers of experiential anatomy such as Andrea Olsen And Caryn McHose (Olsen & McHose, 1991). Experiential anatomy also occupied a central role in the Feldenkrais four-year professional training which I undertook in order to become a certified teacher of the method in 2003. After leaving the SNDO, I continued to study independently with some of the leading practitioners of post-modern dance including Steve Paxton, Simone Forti and Julyen Hamilton. I made and continue to make improvised performances.

I began teaching in Bristol, UK in 1996 after leaving the SNDO. I did so with the encouragement of one of my contact improvisation teachers, Nancy Stark Smith, who suggested that if I wanted to get better at the form, then I should try teaching it. More specifically, to learn the most I should teach beginners. I thus entered into teaching fully-primed to approach it as both personal research and a privileged form of learning.

My interest in teaching movement grew to cover a number of different areas, all broadly somatic in approach. I teach improvisation for performance and contact improvisation, as well as Authentic Movement, experiential anatomy and the Feldenkrais Method. In recent years, I have developed an interest in teaching broadly-based movement exploration classes in which I draw on all the forms of somatic education that I have experienced. One of these I call Awareness Perception Presence and is oriented towards performing artists and the other I call BodySchool is for anyone who is interested.

I moved to Finland in September 2001 and I now teach regularly in a number of Finnish dance and performing arts educations including: the Theatre Academy of Finland (TEAK); the dance department of the North Karelian Vocational Institute in Outokumpu which offers a well-regarded three-year Post-Modern Dance education; and at ISLO in Joensuu which offers a one-year Education In Dance And Somatics programme. I also continue to travel abroad teaching and performing.
Part Two: The Course

Structure

My thinking about improvisation has been heavily influenced by my studies at the SNDO. Credits for all practical classes and workshops at the school fell under the following four categories – exploration, technique, improvisation and composition – with graduation depending on fulfilling the required number of credits for each. It was made explicit that the categories connected and overlapped. Exploration and technique both addressed the skills of dancing, while improvisation and composition addressed the skills of creating and performing dances. I find it useful to make this distinction between exploration and improvisation. I have also found it useful to make a further distinction between the study of improvisation and the performance of it.

In structuring this course, I wanted each of the weekly classes to address one of these three areas of study: Mondays, self-exploration; Tuesdays, improvisation; and Thursdays, performance. Exercises addressing improvisation lead on organically to performance and I regard watching both improvisation exercises and watching each other perform to be an important part of the learning process for students. So, while the Monday exploration classes very clearly addressed exploration, the lines between the Tuesday and Thursday classes were less clearly drawn. Two things that did mark out the Thursday class as different however, were that there was a musician present, and that we would always spend the last 30-45 minutes with a stage space marked out in the studio performing in small groups for each other.

Although it was not a requirement of the course, for the students or myself, I felt that it would be appropriate if the course concluded with a performance demo for an outside audience. The school offers the opportunity for Friday lunchtime performances, so I suggested in the first week that the students might perform on the Friday of the last week of the course. The students agreed and I booked us into the schedule. I thought that by doing this, it would add some coherence to the trajectory of the course. In my experience, while improvisation can be interesting to study in class, the actual performance of improvisation cannot be taught or learned in class, it can only be experienced. Pre-performance nerves put us in an adrenalised state which cannot be simulated in class and causes a large shift.
in perception. I thought that having an experience improvising live for an audience would create an additional learning opportunity.

Aims

As stated in the introduction, I was educated in a school where improvisation was highly valued and have since specialised in studying and performing improvisation. My impression, based on my experience of meeting many more traditionally-educated dancers in a wide variety of settings, is that improvisation is not so highly valued nor particularly rigorously taught in many mainstream dance educations. I acknowledge that as a performance mode in itself, it may not be of particular interest to many dancers. However, I do believe that it has a place in contemporary dance education when presented in its full breadth for all that it has to offer.

When I was booked to teach the course, I was simply asked to teach improvisation. By including movement exploration, making the distinction between improvisation and performance, and orienting the class towards a final performance, I aimed to introduce the students to the full range of everything that the study of improvisation might have to offer them. In short, to catch their interest, knowing that different students might be interested by different elements. I hoped that they might make connections to other areas of dance that they study and take away some specific tools, exercises or practices that they could make use of, in whatever context. Since they were first-year students at the beginning of the first semester of their studies, I thought that focusing on group improvisation would make for a basic introductory course as well as creating an opportunity for them to get to know each other better as a group in the process.

Introducing movement exploration

Movement exploration classes offer students the possibility to explore and develop their own movement from first principals. In contrast to traditional techniques classes, there is no requirement to imitate a teacher. The emphasis is developing the ability to listen to our internal sensations as we move rather than on how the movement looks, and as such can be characterised as somatic in nature. My own approach derives from my ongoing study of the Feldenkrais Method, experiential anatomy and developmental movement alongside my experience of other somatic disciplines.

What I presented in the Monday class is part of a body of work that I have developed called Awareness Perception Presence (Manning, 2009) in which I juxtapose experiential
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anatomy with the Feldenkrais Method, framed in a context fleshed out by insights resulting from my own personal investigations. Each class presented a single movement principle or theme and consisted of three discreet sections.

In the first part (Initial Guided Exploration, around 30-45 minutes), we began by bringing our attention to the physical sensations present in walking and standing. I introduced the theme or principal for the class and its application in life and dance, sometimes showing examples through pictures or videos, and gave any relevant anatomical information. We then explored some reference movements or positions particular to the theme of the class. In the second part, around 45-60 minutes, I gave a Feldenkrais Method Awareness Through Movement (ATM) class. These ATMs consisted of very detailed guided movement explorations of many variations around a particular theme. They were done in a very relaxed manner, often lying down or sitting with eyes closed. Students were invited to move their attention around themselves during the ATM to notice the connected patterns of sensation occurring throughout their bodies. In the third part, (Self-Directed Exploration, around 30 minutes), we returned to paying attention to the physical sensations present in walking, standing and any of the class-specific reference movements which, after the ATM. I then put on some music and gave free time for self-directed exploration, suggesting that we began with the class-specific reference movements and then follow our own movement interests as they unfolded. In closing, we returned to the simple references of walking and standing so that we could notice any further shifts in our sensations as a result of our self-directed explorations. We also took time to share our impressions verbally.

In these classes, we worked independently, engaging with the material presented at our own level and finding our own points of interest within it. One of the greatest joys of teaching this work is to witness how differently people work with the material. This seems natural given that we are of different ages and genders, have different body types, temperaments, physical training, life histories and cultural backgrounds. What can develop through engaging in movement exploration is a deeper relationship with and knowledge of the self. One of the principals that I work with is that whatever we do, we do with the whole of ourselves. Moshe Feldenkrais described the component parts as action (movement), feeling (emotion), thinking and sensation. Therefore, because of the holistic nature of the self, then if we improve the ability of any of those components, we improve the function of the whole. (Feldenkrais, 1972; p31-32)
The obvious components of interest are movement and sensation. Some students also came to realise the connection to their emotions and thought processes. As dancers, our body is our instrument and our relationship to affects not only our dance, but every moment of our lives. In his classes, Feldenkrais frequently summed up the value of paying attention to ourselves very simply: “If you know what you do, you can do what you want,” (Alon, 1996; p215) He also expressed it inversely: how can you do what you want, if you don’t know what you are doing?

Material covered in movement exploration classes

The overall theme that I chose for the Monday exploration classes was to explore the head and torso. It is often overlooked as a source of movement and as a support for the limbs. I have even had students in the past report that they were taught in dance classes not to move the torso; the image of the torso as a box which should not be deformed, the idea being to articulate the legs and arms independently of the torso. This is of course an extreme, but I don’t think it is an overstatement to say that many more traditionally trained dancers tend to focus primarily on the use of the arms and legs.

There is something essentially human about the head and torso since they house all of the vital organs. I have met a couple of people with no arms or legs who are still very much human beings, but I’ve never yet met a living human without a head or with a large part of the torso missing. Anatomically, the “fish body” (the axial skeleton, organised around the spine) forms the core of the body (Olsen & McHose, 1991; p49) and in evolutionary terms this is a far older structure than the upper or lower limbs (Shubin, 2008; p31-43). This primacy of the “fish body” is represented in many cultures, particularly in relation to the spine (McHose & Frank, 2006; p64) and I believe it is no coincidence that all the improvisation teachers of repute that I have studied with have emphasised the spine as a compositional reference. I employed many improvisation exercises that used the spine and the three-dimensionality of the torso as a references. The students had easier access to these exercises as their familiarity with their torsos and spines increased. I also believe that the more generalised ability to listen to themselves as they moved helped to foster their ability to listen to each other while improvising together.

What follows is a brief synopsis of what was taught in each of the five classes – vertical axis and the spine; side-bending and the fish body; sagittal folding and front and back; the breastbone; integrating the movements of the torso; breath – so that the reader can have a better idea of what we covered and how later it might connect to the rest of the course.
Vertical axis and the spine – In the first class, we explored how the body aligns in the vertical axis. How the flow of weight downwards through the bones is met by an equal and opposite counter-force which I call support which flows upwards. The more aligned the bones can be, the more support we receive through the bones and the less muscular effort is involved in standing. This alignment changes unconsciously according to our mood (Todd, 1937; Bernard et al. 2006; Franklin, 1996). We discovered how standing is a dynamic activity. Besides the flow of the weight and support, there are also the unconscious reflex actions which work to keep us aligned efficiently (Paxton, 2008). The more we trust ourselves to these reflexes, the less effort it is to stand. Not only are humans the only animals to spend the greater part of our active lives in this vertical orientation, but we are the only animals to turn around this axis. The unique curved structure of our spine allows us to do this. (McHose & Frank, 2006; p100)

We explored the more central position of the weight bearing bodies of the vertebrae relative to the spinous processes which we feel along our back surfaces and examined how the structure of the vertebral facets affect rotation along the spine (Calais-Germain, B. 1993 p49-61). For those who have never looked at the anatomical structure before, it came as a surprise how far towards the vertical axis the weight bearing part of the spine is (Rolland, 1987, p67; Olsen & McHose, 1991, p50), and how the ability of the lumber spine to rotate is far less than that of the thoracic spine. I also use this class to introduce the Feldenkrais Method ATMs and the process of self-guided exploration. We saw how turning around this vertical axis is part of walking, and how after attending to these turning movements we tend to view the world more in terms of up and down.

Side-bending and the fish body – The second class introduced the concept of the “fish body” and the movement theme of side-bending (lateral movement of the head and torso). We explored two side-bending movements, both of which can be done with the image of using the legs simply to get the earth away so the spine is free to move as it did in the ocean. The “fish swish” is initiated by imagining a filmy fish tail as an extension of the spine, moving it side-to-side and sensing how the movement travels up the torso (McHose & Frank, 2006; p62). The side-to-side serpentine (Paxton, 2008) is initiated from the top of the head travelling in a lateral figure-of eight pathway through space which sends an undulating wave-like movement down the spine.

We explored the structure of the ribcage and thoracic spine, noticing that there are around 120 joints in the thoracic region, many more than most people assume. The ATM
class explored opening and closing different areas along the sides of the ribs. In the ATM, I pointed out that, despite our desire, especially as dancers, for perfect functional symmetry, our natural condition on a fine scale is both functional and structural asymmetry.\(^{14}\)

We also saw how lateral movements of the torso and spine are part of walking (Paxton, 2008) and how after attending to these sideways movements we tend to view the world more in terms of left and right.

**Sagittal folding and front and back** – Introducing the final plane of movement of the torso, sagittal folding and unfolding of the spine in walking is a source of a lot of power. We looked in more detail at the how the ribs join to the spine, curving back behind the spine before looping back forwards to meet it. We explored three different sagittally-organised movements. The “bounce”\(^{15}\) in which we fold every joint in the body a little, then push the earth away to come back to standing. The mammalian “whale tail” movement is initiated by imagining a powerful whale tail as an extension of the spine, moving it forwards and backwards, sensing how the movement travels up the torso. The sagittal serpentine is initiated from the top of the head, similar to the sideways serpentine but in the sagittal plane. The ATM explored the sagittal curves of the spine, revealing the head-tail connection through the spine, the relationship of the curves of the neck and lower back, and the complex sagittally-organised sequencing required in rolling up and down the spine on the back. After the self-directed exploration people clearly reported perceiving the world predominantly in terms of front and back.

**The breastbone** – Before explicitly exploring combining the three planes, I find it useful to work with the area of the front of the chest which, anatomically at least, is a complete mystery to most people. With so much work on the spine in the first three classes, working with the front of the chest brought us a feeling of three dimensionality that further strengthened the perception of the vertical axis. Most people underestimate the length of their breastbones, many by a considerable amount. Anatomically, the idea that the breastbone has a joint, let alone the four joints (Gray, 1918; fig 119) that we have until puberty, or the three that persist until our mid-twenties, is a revelation. As it is to consider that the bony ribs do not join directly with the breastbone, but it is their cartilaginous extensions that surround it. The message was that the front of the chest is jointed, flexible and full of potential articulation. The ATM both served to locate and connect the breastbone through the torso to the shoulders and hips, and more distally to the arms and legs. It also introduced the possibility of initiating movements from the breastbone. In the self-
directed exploration, we explored initiating movements at either end of the breastbone with the image of the breastbone as a small spine. After the self-directed exploration, the group reported perceiving themselves as having more depth.

**Integrating the movements of the torso** – We recapped the movements of the three planes and the breastbone, and went into more detail on how to differentiate the fish body from the legs. We then explored compound serpentine movements on diagonals which appeared simple, but challenged many because of the novel articulation that they asked of the chest. In standing, we explored relating first the head to the feet, then the head to the tail. After the ATM which explored circling the head and tail in detail, the chest was more mobile for many in our self-directed exploration and the resulting perception of the world around us more fully three-dimensional.

**Breath** – We looked at the anatomy of the structures that participate directly in breath and felt how the movements of these parts radiate throughout the body. We discussed what good breathing might be and I suggested that the idea of good breathing might be better substituted by the idea of appropriate breathing. To illustrate this, I asked if it is a good idea to hold the breath while moving which was greeted by a universal, “no”. I then asked them what they would do if they were swimming underwater. It’s all about context. We did an ATM which explored how the breath can adapt to the position we adopt. Working with breath consolidated our sense of three dimensionality as well as fostered a sense of calmness and ease in movement. We ended with an open exploration of the movements of the torso, this time with a task of noticing moments of holding the breath.

**Homework** – At the end of every class, I gave a simple homework assignment. The idea was that it should not be a heavy burden but something they could do whenever they remembered and a suitable opportunity arose. For example: to bring their attention to the vertical axis in standing while waiting for a bus or a tram; to notice the action of the torso in walking; or to notice their breath. My intention with these assignments was to offer an opportunity to connect the material that the students were exploring in these classes with the rest of their lives.

*(Note to the reader: For me it is important to include in the main body of the text some outline of the material covered in the course. In a lot of academic writing about dance, it’s not actually very clear what kind of dance is referred to. Even when the genre is widely recognised, so much depends on the choices and personality of the teacher. In my work, where the genre is not clear, some explanation of the content of the classes seems*
especially necessary. While the synopses above give some indications, I would direct the curious reader to the more detailed description of a class that can be found in the Appendix. This will give a better impression of the how as well as fuller account of the what. Better still of course would be to come and take or watch a class.)

Exploring improvisation

By its very nature, anything can happen during an improvised performance, so how can it be taught? Not only do we need to make instant compositional decisions, but we also have to make those decisions from within the composition as it is unfolding. We have neither the luxury of time to experiment with alternatives nor the benefit of seeing from the outside how our decisions effect the whole. This is where I believe the appeal of watching improvised performance lies, mine certainly. It is the pleasure derived from watching the compositional decisions made in the moment. Unfolding before our eyes.

I think of the study of improvisation primarily as a study of perception and then of composition. The more we can perceive of what we are doing and what is happening around us, then the more compositional elements are available to us. The basis for this is simply to study what happens as people interact together in time and space. In order to do that, I regard it as important to watch others doing the exercises as do them ourselves. We can learn from alternating between the experience of what it is to do them (feeling them from the inside) and what they look like when viewed from outside. This is a very different process to watching oneself in the mirror while doing.

In watching these improvisational exercises, any notion of performance is set aside. This relieves us of any impulses we may have to perform (an activity that carries considerable baggage for many of us) and foregrounds the simple perception of what we experience, in doing and watching. What can emerge is a recognition that there is more to improvisation than great dancing. There can also be great compositional choices.

In practice, wonderful things happened compositionally. In the role of watcher, I encouraged us all to notice what happens inside us when we had what I call “aha” moments – moments that “touch” us or “move” us. I discouraged trying to fill what were doing with any theatrical emotion, to try to make emotion flow. Instead the research was what kind of emotion emerged from motion. In the act of recognising and then sharing which moments touched us, without having to explain how or why, I think we develop our kinaesthetic aesthetics. These aesthetics originate in a realm that is untouched by language, they can be felt directly in the body while watching. They are visceral.
In the beginning, the students sometimes struggled with the simplicity, some might say banality, of the exercises, and some came to feel like their dancing was taken away from them. It took a while to establish the trust with the students that they would probably be sweating by the end of the class. Many of the exercises imposed limits on what could be done and/or demanded so much attention to what was going on that that in itself became a limitation. Many of the exercises were long slow progressions that started with something very simple, but gradually grew more and more complex and challenging by the end. Yet others consisted of proposing a task which was actually impossible, the point being that it was interesting to see what happened in attempting it. For some, besides the content, I think these particular exercises underlined the fact that that we were embarked on a journey of discovery, rather than trying to get something right.

With the focus of these exercises being so much on perception and composition, sometimes the students become overwhelmed by all the things they could attend to and make choices about. I was surprised when one exercise I gave on listening to the sensations in a part of the spine while walking and making simple phrases rendered two students incapable of movement. My intention was that what they learned in these exercises would serve them rather than imprison them. My experience is that in taking time to attend to something very slowly and consciously, it will then become available to us when we need to choose very quickly, without thinking. I hoped that in the performance studies they would get a chance to experience this for themselves. I like to compare this learning process to that of learning to ride a bicycle or drive a car. While we are learning, it is the act of cycling or driving that occupies our thoughts. Once we have learned then we are no longer concerned with the act of cycling or driving. Instead, we are getting from A to B, maybe enjoying the view along the way and talking to our companions as we go. We are journeying.

Material covered in exploring improvisation
The idea behind the course was to get the students to improvise together. While much of the material that was studied can also be applied to dancing solo, we explored it most often in the context of group improvisation. The exercises that I gave addressed four main issues: listening, phrasing, space and time.

**Listening** – Whether improvising alone or with others, listening to what is going on inside and around us is essential. I use the word listening in both its literal and metaphorical sense. Another word for this might be awareness.
Phrasing – I liken phrasing in dance to punctuation in written and spoken language. In language, sense is lost without punctuation. It is very difficult and tiring to read or listen to unpunctuated language. Likewise with unpunctuated movement. Phrases to the dancer are the equivalent of sentences to a writer or poet. In traditional dance classes, phrases are often combined into set sequences which are learned. In improvisation, organising our movement into phrases as we go helps to make it intelligible to an audience. It can be a valid artistic decision not to phrase movement, but when I see inexperienced dancers improvise often it is simply the default mode.

How to define phrases in dance is somewhat subjective and hard to describe in words. In the broadest sense, phrasing simply denotes an activity which begins, continues and then ends. The question then is maybe one of reference points. Depending on the reference point, one person could be very clearly phrasing their movement one way while another person watching who is employing a different reference point might read the phrasing differently. This difference in interpretation is not so important since what is clear from both sides is that something has been shaped. On this course, we explored many exercises that addressed phrasing, both explicitly and implicitly.

Explicitly, we worked with tracking the movement of parts of the spine through space, tracking the sensation of shifting vs. resting weight, and using the breath as a reference for making phrases. At first, I would insist on simple clear phrasing so that we could learn to recognise the sensation of this simple clarity. These phrases had something of the character of ,"the cat sat on the mat"," and I referred to this mode as vanilla phrasing Later, I would encourage more complex phrasing using the full range of punctuation.

We also studied the beginnings, middles and endings of phrases. How to make these clear for ourselves and how to read them in others. We studied phrasing from the different perspectives of space and time, and explored the link between them in that it takes time to get from one place to another. We looked at our habitual phrase length and explored how varying phrase length can be used compositionally. Implicitly, a number of other exercises looking at different themes generated a phrase structure which either the students spotted or I drew their attention to.

Space – We explored how our relationship to space differs depending on whether we are referencing Cartesian space (compass directions plus up and down) or radial space (body-centred directions of front and back, side, and above and below) and how the interaction of these two frames of reference can be a powerful compositional tool.
We explored the relative placement in space of two or more individuals using the spine and torso as references and the difference between doing this with and without reference to the frame formed by the edges of the studio. We also explored the image of “letting the space move us” through listening for “something in the air”. It’s a very specific tool that has the effect of tricking the mind into a state of responsiveness that often has remarkable results. The effect is one of knowing at an instinctual level what to do in any moment and making movement feel lighter. I can only speculate how it works.

**Time and timing** – We explored what it is to be on time, in time, early and late and how these differences can be used compositionally. We then explored how, through making regular “vanilla” phrases, one of us could create a “bass line” over which, simply by playing with timing, another another could create something that is read as a solo.

**Homework** – As with with the exploration work, the perceptual and compositional phenomena that we were exploring are present in all areas of life. Homework assignments included: observing phrasing in their daily lives, how certain activities begin and end, how activities overlap; to notice the structural organisation of classes they took, music they listened to, films they watched; to observe themselves being early, late or on time for appointments; or to observe how people organise themselves in public spaces and to see if they could affect the composition by playing with how they placed themselves in relation. My intention with these assignments was again to offer them an opportunity to connect their lives at school as dancers and the rest of their lives.

*(Note to the reader: again, for those curious to get more of a feel for what went on in these classes, you find a detailed account of one of these exercises in the Appendix)*

**Exploring performance**

We often transitioned directly from improvisational exercises into the study of performance simply by moving the exercise from an open studio space into a stage area. In the language of improvisation, the rules that had delineated the exercise became a performance score. A score is simply a set of instructions from which a composition emerges. Depending on the score, the composition that emerges can be more or less predictable.

As the course developed, we made many such transitions. I would often run a few performances with the score from the preceding exercise in place and then shift to an open score. Beyond setting the space and a few very basic rules of entering and exiting the stage, the dancers could chose to do whatever they wanted. These open scores would tend be influenced by the preceding explorations, sometimes in a way which surprised
the students. Evidence of the riding-a-bicycle phenomenon. That they had begun to internalise these scores.

On Thursdays we always ended by marking out a stage and taking turns watching each other perform. We had a very talented musician who specialises in improvisation present on these Thursdays. She would accompany the performances. Unfortunately, because the time was so short, there was no time to work in detail on the interaction of music with the dance. However, since the students were used to dancing with music, they worked in a very intuitive way with what she was offering. Her presence nonetheless marked out the Thursdays as different, the students grew to trust her playing and she was able to come and play for the students at the final performance demo.

After each performance, I would ask the students sitting in the audience line what they had seen. I made it explicit that we were learning as a group and then each group that went up to perform was building on what they had learned from what they had seen before. That this was very much a group learning endeavour. I would also give suggestions and sometimes further tasks for the next group based on what they said and what I had seen with my more experienced eye.

In the opening weeks of the course, I would pick up the theme that we had explored on Tuesday and make a transition as described above to an open score. In the later weeks, as the students became more accustomed performing for each other, I would precede the open score with performance specific explorations. These included: contrast, beginnings and endings, how to enter the stage, mapping out the stage; solos, giving and receiving the focus, what to do when you don’t know what to do; transparency and doing what you think you shouldn't do. I will now explain each of them in more detail.

Material covered in exploring performance

Contrast – I gave an exercise I first came across when studying mime and physical theatre that I find very useful in teaching dance impro since it gives a very clear experience of how the focus can move around on stage. The rule was that there can only be two different types of activity happening at the same time. A further refinement was that one of the activities should clearly have the focus while the other was in the background. The activities didn’t need to be dance and people ended up doing some very strange things. What was interesting to see was how the activities transform, especially when the transitions didn’t happen cleanly. Something that tends to happen often is that there are moments
where three things are happening at once: something has the focus, something is in the background and something is either being born or is dying away.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Beginnings and endings} – Building on phrasing and the work on contrast, we looked at how open scores tend to be episodic in nature. We dialogued on how we read these episodes, particularly with reference to beginnings and endings, and how an awareness of episodic structure can help to create the composition of the whole piece. I would often give an approximate time that pieces should last and say that the group should find a clear ending. There is often a tendency to improvise endlessly, passing through many potential endings, before an end is called by someone outside.

\textit{How to enter the stage} – It’s very easy to get stuck offstage while watching the action onstage. A common fear among improvisers is that when we arrive on stage we will have nothing to do. What actually happens is we find that ideas and impulses keep coming very rapidly and there is a tendency to jump from one to another without allowing time for them to develop. But still we need to get out there.

A trap that is easy to fall into is trying to figure out what to do. The problem is that in the time that it takes to arrive onstage the situation has moved forward, our plan may no longer make sense and, by being focused on our plan, we close ourselves to new possibilities. I tried to simplify the choice to one of when to enter. To support this, echoing some work from the exploration class on shifting our perception from front to back, we practised not entering the stage but rather exiting the offstage area.

\textit{Mapping out the stage} – We examined the ways that different parts of the stage function differently. We worked with a classical rectilinear stage area with a curtain at the back and an audience line at the front. The stage was deeper than it was wide which supports dance since it allows for the more dynamic forwards/backwards pathways, more dynamic since the performers appear to grow and shrink in size while using them. We explored the three layers of the stage: within reaching distance of the back wall which tends to frame and flatten the performer, the middle space where the performer tends to be perceived as fully three-dimensional while remaining framed by the back wall; and the front of the stage where detail is more apparent and the performer pops out from the frame of the back curtain to dominate the view. We also explored the area where if the performer steps too far to the front then they begin to enter the audience space. We mapped out the geometry of the stage, experiencing the different effects of moving across or up and down stage and on the diagonals.
**Solos** – although the focus of the course was to improvise as a group, group compositions can include solos, alone on stage or supported by others. Since there wasn’t time to really go into improvising solos, I gave a task of “dancing the place” that I have found can quickly give students a tool to construct solos. This is a very specific line of work\(^\text{17}\) that could fill a whole course in itself. It contained within it a very different approach to phrasing based on taking impulses from what we see, or in its more developed form what we imagine seeing. I then casually dropped the students in a the deep end by getting them to perform two minute solos one after another.

**Giving and receiving the focus** – We explored the difference between giving and receiving the focus onstage in solos, duets and trios. Very simply, we can do something to take the focus from what is happening, leave or in some way diminish what we are doing to hand the focus on, or else similarly receive the focus from others. We explored the compositional potential of this. How we can use it to support each other by giving space for something that’s developing, and coming in with something new when we sense that what’s going on has peaked and is beginning to die away.

**What to do when you don’t know what to do** – I offered many strategies, among them a very simple rule of thumb: “If you’re not getting off, get off!”\(^\text{18}\) In other words, if you are not interested in what you are doing, stop doing it. Another strategy is to do something familiar, boring even, and let something develop from there. There can be an assumption that one should start from scratch, from zero. An alternative is simply to get moving and consider the moving as a starting point. I suggested as possibilities something as simple as walking, or else one of the improvisational exercises that we had covered. In both cases, we can use our compositional sense to find a place or a way to begin that doesn’t draw the focus of the audience. During these repeated transitions from what I called improvisational studies to performance studies, I suggested many times that the improvisational studies were in part an opportunity to explore consciously and in doing so “put something in the body” that could manifest unconsciously in performance: the learning to ride a bicycle metaphor again. In the context of performance, I suggested that some of the things we did in improvisation studies could be used as doors through which to enter improvisational mind which I would describe more as watching oneself respond to what is happening than doing something. Being in the flow.

**Transparency** – As we watched more and more performances, the students began to notice in each other a difference between trying to make something happen and being
a part of what is happening. It also became clear that while we always saw something happening with a performer, how we interpreted it was very personal. We noticed when someone got lost, or if they stopped listening to what was going on around them, or when they tried to make something happen. At first, being exposed in this way could be daunting, but this shifted as we came to recognise the difference between what the audience can know about us – not much – and what they can imagine and interpret about us – a lot. Rather than trying to tell something, the task becomes simply to allow oneself to be read. In the context of an improvisation, we move through many different states and overall it is this passage through these states, the larger composition, that the audience follows and insert themselves into interpretively. Compositionally, the moments of sublime creativity are heightened by their juxtaposition with moments of being lost. Watching improvisation is like watching creativity happen. The process laid bare.

I introduced the concept of transparency that I was introduced to by Simone Forti. She describes this as a state in the performer of being so interested and absorbed in what they are doing that the audience members start to see through the performer to what they are doing and no longer see the performer. As an intention, even if not fully realised, this creates a very different quality of stage presence from the performer who wants to be seen.

*The Joker*: *doing what you think you shouldn’t do* – The potency of an open improvised performance is that anything can happen. The danger in presenting the explorations and making the comments that I did throughout the course is that the students might stifle their creativity as a result of what they imagine I think of as right and wrong, no matter how carefully and how often I tried to explain that when I suggested they do one thing instead of another, I was always doing so in the context of what we were exploring at that moment. The Joker is an exercise that I invented to try to defuse that.

I asked the students to come up with a list of dos and don’ts from what we have studied. I collected the papers and, while they warmed up, selected a few of the most interesting items. I turned their dos into don’ts and vice versa and wrote them as instructions on single pieces of paper which then become jokers. So, “don’t dance with you socks on” became “put your socks on and dance”, “make clear phrases” became “don’t make clear phrases”, “don’t enter the audience space” became “enter the audience space”, etc. I let the students pick out a joker each and in the open score that followed, if they liked they could enter and work with the task on their joker card. They were also free to trade cards. Through this exercise I tried to empower them to do whatever they felt inspired to do,
including all the things that I had suggested not to do during the course. Now if they chose to do them, it was clearly a compositional choice.

All this is from me – In the final class, I explained that all that I had presented was just my view of improvisation. The result of what I got interested in after studying with only a few teachers, and had continued to research myself. In this process, I went up many different alleys, some seemed to me to be dead ends while for others they might not have been, and others I simply turned back from in order to pursue other lines of interest. There’s a lot to explore. I also suggested that maybe my way of approaching the material was something the could learn from as much as the material itself.

Performance demonstration
The open score performance was the form that we presented in the performance demo. This so-called open score had a few clear structural elements that framed it. We worked with a classic rectilinear performance area (stage) with a clear audience line in front and a back curtain. The side walls we regarded as offstage, meaning that the performers could enter and exit the stage from the sides only and while waiting at the side were considered offstage. The performers would start offstage with a clear stage but after that they were free to enter and exit as they pleased as the piece unfolded.

In the last couple of weeks, I moved the classes into a studio which offered a natural stage so that we didn’t have to mark one out on the floor. In this way, all our classes doubled up as rehearsals for the demo. In an improvised performance there is nothing to rehearse (in the sense of repeat) as such, however continuing to work in the space that we would perform in allowed a growing familiarity with it which I hoped would be supportive. No amount of studio work can fully prepare you for a performance for a real audience. It is a very different situation. I don’t think the students had really understood what they were letting themselves in for when they agreed to the demo. This would be the first time that their peers would see them perform in the school. It was not until the audience came in that I think this really hit them. They were already getting nervous as they warmed up, listening to the growing buzz of the audience gathering outside.

The excitement was palpable, creating a wonderful adrenalised learning situation for them. In our talk just before the performance began, I suggested that, in the context of the course, this was an opportunity to notice how their sense of time might be different in this state they found themselves in. We had decided earlier in the week to present two 15
minute sets with half of the group in each. An additional task was to find a clear end in
the time. I hoped this would be made easier by the presence of the musician.

I led a very brief moment of tuning in together; listening to the sounds while standing
eyes closed in a close circle, opening the eyes and looking around to see each other,
then, recalling one of our exercises on timing, I threw a sock in the air and we all tapped
a foot together when it landed. Happily, we were all very much in time together.

The students continued their warm up with the musician as the audience came in.
With about 30-40 people in a small studio it felt very full. A full house. I gave a short in-
troduction and then pulled the names of the first group to go out of a hat. This had the ef-
effect of showing the audience that what was about to unfold was entirely improvised and
also meant the students would arrive at the situation entirely fresh.

I was very pleased and touched by how the students performed. The first group got off
to a shaky start, entirely understandable in the situation, but soon settled into it, produc-
ing a dynamic overall composition full of contrasts, and coming in just one minute over
time. The second group started strong and produced some great moments, including
some very comical ones, although compositionally as a whole it was not so coherent and
lost its way a little from around two thirds in. This group was a little too polite in giving
space to each other, giving the feeling sometimes of waiting for something to happen. In
the discussion afterwards, they arrived at this conclusion themselves as a group. They also
came in at 16 minutes which fulfilled the timing task. It was a pity in retrospect that they
had only had one performance. It would have been great to do more as they would have
learned with each experience and had more experiences to look back on. As it was, I re-
corded a video registration of the performance (available for viewing) which the students
were very keen to have. On the one hand, it was great as they could see what they did.
On the other, I worried that it might become too much of a product and that they might
see the whole course through the filter of this one video.

We got to speak together for about 15 minutes after the performance. As a group, they
were very happy with how the performance went and we had a brief moment to hear
from everyone. I remember feeling very satisfied and relieved as I get more nervous
watching my students perform than performing myself. And that was it. They were off on
holiday and I was off teaching elsewhere. I got three responses to an emailed question-
naire but had no more than passing contact with some of them until we met together as a
group for an hour in the middle of their second semester.
Part Three : Reflection

My own reflection on the course

What follows is a reflection based on my own memory of the course and what the students said to me in class during it.

I was very pleased with how the course worked. I enjoyed working with such skilled technical dancers who were also open and hungry for experience. In the first couple of classes, they were quite bemused by my approach. The very first class was exploration and they were not used to working in such a slow, gentle and relaxed fashion where they were not put under pressure to perform, achieve in particular or work hard physically. Still, I know the potential effects of the work and I recall in this first class that the majority reported feeling a positive effect. From the change in their alignment in standing from the beginning to the end of the class, I could see some students had “got it”, even if they were not sure or able to articulate exactly what it was that they were getting. By the end of the second exploration class, I felt that they were all on board and had opened up a dialogue with their own physical sensations.

Likewise, in the first improvisation exercise detailed in part two which began simply by saying our names and standing up or sitting down, the bemusement continued. But by the end of it, when they were up and dancing to music, working with the task that produced something that looked recognisably like a dance composition, I felt I had won their confidence and interest, and from that point, their enthusiasm seemed to grow over the remainder of the course.

Looking back, I think it was remarkable how quickly things turned around. By the end of the second week, they said they were saying how much they were looking forward to the classes, largely because of the atmosphere in them which contrasted greatly with the rest of their school routine according to them. In my classes, the mirrors are covered, we often sit in a circle together to dialogue about the exercises that we have done, and I like to play. My attitude to learning is that it is done best through play, and for me play coexists with fun. They said that the other classes were very serious and they never got to sit down and talk together. While these other classes they described as hard work, they said
that mine were interesting. Now I reflect on it, I think maybe the distinction might be between learning and training.

One person said one day that my classes were more “human” and “philosophical”. This I think might have been because I often draw parallels, in both the exploration and improvisation work, between what we study in the studio and associated phenomena in daily life. I like to bring in knowledge, ideas, images, and anecdotes that I pick up from a wide range of other sources; from film to athletics, neuroscience to natural history. There was also a comment that in my classes they had space and time to “feel themselves”.

On another course, one student said that they thought that my sense of humour was a very important role in the unfolding of my classes. In her words:


After hearing that, I realised that this light, joyful, pleasurable atmosphere that I try to create is not only a powerful tool to aid learning but also parallels the quality of movement and attention that I seek to bring people towards. It is part of my character, but I think I took the impulse to use it pedagogically from my experience of many of my teachers; Steve Paxton has a notoriously dry sense of humour, and creating a light easy atmosphere where pleasure plays the role of a guide is part of the pedagogical frame of the Feldenkrais method. (Feldenkrais, 1972)

Even if they were not working hard, then they were working a lot, though maybe in ways that they were not accustomed to. Sometime in the middle of the course at the end of the class, one of them said:

“It’s funny, but even though the classes are very relaxed, I feel really tired afterwards. You are making us work a lot really, aren’t you?”

There seemed to be near universal agreement and plenty of laughter. This makes a lot of sense to me since the classes do demand a lot of attention. The model that I work with in common with many somatic disciplines (Manning, 2009) as well as contemporary neuroscience (Blakeslee, 2007) is that in paying full attention to what one is doing, particularly physical sensations, while exploring a novel task, one is quite literally growing new neurological connections in the brain. And this requires energy; the nervous system consumes as much as 60 percent of the energy we absorb from our food (Juhan, 1991). In short, I take the students post-class fatigue as evidence that learning was happening on an organic level.
That the students enjoyed my classes is one thing, that they were learning something in them another, but what did they learn? Before considering the additional feedback that I received directly from the students by email and in our meeting, I will reflect on the what I noticed during the performance.

In the open scores that we had done in the classes, I had noticed a growing competence, sensitivity and confidence with the material and the way of working that I had presented. In the performance demonstration, I felt I saw it propelled to another level. What I believed I was seeing, which was confirmed in our brief discussion together afterwards, was that the were not working so consciously with the material as they had in the classes, but were allowing themselves to be carried along by the flow and achieving this quality of transparency in sustained moments by following their interest. Returning to the bicycle metaphor, they now appeared to be going somewhere rather than learning to ride.

I also saw what seemed to me to be clear conscious use of some of what we had learned. I would put into this category, for example, their ability to listen to the situation, and give time and space for episodes to develop on stage before making their entrances. And I saw a couple of people using the *dancing the place* exercise as a way to get something started for themselves.

I saw a clarity of phrasing and the use of space compositionally that seemed to support their flow, though I was not always sure whether or not it was conscious or the expression of this deeper form of organic learning process that they had undergone.

To give a concrete example, in their earlier open score performances, in common with many groups I’ve taught before, they had a strong default tendency to enter the stage on a horizontal route perpendicular to the side of the stage. Not only that, but they when they met each other onstage they would often tend to group themselves along these horizontal paths. While it it is part of the compositional palette, it is a relatively weak choice that tends to flatten the perspective and, when it recurs frequently, it is monotonous. One of the more dynamic choices is to use a diagonal.

During the course, while the exploration classes sought to built a greater awareness of the potential planes of movement and alignment radiating out from the body, in the improvisation classes I gave exercises that attempted to build on this through exploring composition through the interaction of both Cartesian and radial spatial relationships. We then explored how this could be brought to the stage space, which brings with it yet another layer of spatial potentials.
As we worked through this material, their spatial composition became more and more varied and sophisticated. In class, this was not so much of a surprise since we would move directly from these explorations into practising the open score performances. The information was fresh in their bodies. However, in the first set of the performance demo, the diagonal back-stage-left to right-stage-front was a repeating motif, with a minute long episode around 10-11 minutes into the performance where the whole group organises along this diagonal. The effect, especially in this group episode, was compositionally very strong and would be difficult to organise, even consciously.

When I asked them afterwards how they came to work with this motif, none of them could even remember it, let alone remember making a conscious choice to use it. It could just have been chance, but I prefer to believe that it is evidence of all the study we did together.

Meeting with the students
When I first began teaching 13 years ago, I was very concerned about whether the students enjoyed my classes. I found myself doing what I could to please them. But I pretty soon noticed something that at first was confusing, and then, when I understood it better, liberating. Sometimes people who looked like they were having a hard time in class would call me after a class or workshop to say how much they’d enjoyed it and how much they’d learned from it. Conversely, some of those who left looking very happy would never come back. What I realised is that I can never tell simply from appearances what kind of experience people are having in a class. Later, I developed the ability to track the observable physical changes the people undergo in classes. That, together with generally getting older, wiser and more experienced, gives me a more sophisticated way to assess how people are doing. But still, I can never know what they feel or experience. Knowing that frees me from trying to please people in class. Better is to enter into a dialogue in class. Better still after class.

Immediately after the performance demo, I sent a list of questions to the students by email but I only got three responses. The students went on holiday the week after the performance. They were tired and needed a holiday and I guess that as soon as they came back they were again very busy, and I too was busy teaching away from Helsinki. But I went to see the students perform two group pieces midway through the following semester. They were free in the day because of the evening performances and I was able to arrange to meet the whole group for one hour to talk about the course that I gave them.
I would have preferred to have had more individual responses by email, or better still to have talked to them individually, or in pairs, since in a larger group there are always some who talk more and some who talk less. However, this was the only chance and I took it as an opportunity to gather what information I could. During the meeting, since there were 12 of them and we only had 60 minutes, six minutes each. I did my best to listen and not comment or steer them too much. To simply ask my questions and let them speak. I went to the meeting with the following questions, prepared also to let the conversation run its course: “How did your view of improvisation develop as a result of this course?”; “What did you learn? What experiences stand out?”; “In what ways was the performance demonstration a learning experience?”; and “How did the course effect the group?”

“How did your view of improvisation develop as a result of this course?”

What was immediately clear was that their view of improvisation had shifted as a result of the course. I reminded them that when I asked at the beginning who had studied improvisation, they had all said yes. Now with hindsight, many of them now said that what they had thought of as improvisation before was what I called exploration. One said that she had discovered that:

“Improvising is not just going mad. There’s some structure in it and some tools that you can use. So that it’s not just turning off your brains and doing anything. It’s very much about being present in the place and with the other people.”

Some were surprised that in the exploration classes there was no pressure to invent new movement:

“It was nice to have this feeling that you don’t need to search constantly for new movement.”

This makes a lot of sense to me since, while new patterns of movement emerge through exploration, in my classes this is more a very welcome by-product of the process. What I emphasise is more an increasing awareness of what we are doing and, through getting know our own anatomy, an increased level of ease in what we do. Some expressed this very clearly, and also had made the connection to improvising:

“I found a way to explore my body. If we don’t know how we move, what we feel, then we don’t know what we are working with. I think it’s good to explore before we improvise.”

And:
“The Feldenkrais exercises helped me to understand my body and its connections better, which provided material for improvisation. For example, realising that I have a spine and how important it is was a great thing for me!”

Turning to the subject of improvising and performing, one student described how adding the element of composition made clear the distinction between improvisation and exploration:

“Before I used to think that improvisation was about searching for movement. Just moving by yourself. But it really became a composition when we did it all together.”

Another added that for her:

“Improvisation is always about relationships.”

I think this is true,

in the sense that improvisation is about compositional relationships, but exploration is also about our relationship to ourselves, in the context of the surrounding environment.

For some it seemed like the course had opened up improvisation as a field of study:

“Now I feel like improvisation is something to practice and learn.”

While others were now keen to explore it as a mode of performance:

“I think we should perform more improvisation. Even though we practised it in classes. It’s always something different with the audience. Maybe there should be people in classes watching.”

Others however were not so keen to perform improvisation, even if it still held interest for them:

“I don’t personally find improvisation performances so interesting. It’s nice to watch and get ideas from, but I prefer taking things to another level. It’s a great tool in making pieces and there are some beautiful things that can only come in improvisation performances. But still I learn more from studying it than performing it.”

It came as no surprise that some wouldn’t be drawn to improvisation as a performance mode, but I was very happy to hear that there was nonetheless a desire to study it and a recognition that its study had something wider to offer.

In performing improvisation, they appeared to get some relief from the pressure of having to produce something onstage while improvising.

“The thing is not to be interesting but interested. I think that has to do with presence as well because if you are not present then you are not interested.”

And from another:

“Maybe it’s about being honest on stage. Being yourself. Not about inventing something really cool and exciting, but just being there and letting something happen.”
To me this speaks of an expanded level of awareness, and with it a willingness to engage in the larger composition. The connection between presence and the pleasure of simply letting something happen for many created the possibility to enjoy improvisation and with that their confidence grew:

“I had done some improvisation before. Sometimes I liked it more, and sometimes less. But I always found it a bit uncomfortable not knowing what I’m going to do and then trying to invent something clever and original. I learned that it’s about exploring, not inventing. That it’s enough to be committed to what you’re doing and be present on the stage and see what happens. I got some confidence in improvisation and realised that I really enjoy it.”

A topic that we spent some time discussing was fear of improvising. It came up when one person said:

“What I learned was how to enjoy improvisation and not be afraid of it.”

There was general agreement on this so I asked asked what the fear had been. One person said it was:

“The fear of not being interesting enough. What am I going to do now? Can I go there? Will I ruin it if I go there?”

When I asked what had changed then someone said that, besides the emphasis on presence, my encouragement to let go of trying to be good and to feel free to make mistakes had helped a lot. The fear also had a lot to do with feeling exposed onstage as was revealed in the following exchange.

“In the beginning I thought that when I’m moving I’m telling everything about myself. Now I don’t think improvisation is the same as exposing yourself. I don’t get stuck. I wouldn’t feel ashamed anymore. I feel like I’m being myself. Not faking or manipulating the situation. But even so I don’t feel exposed. I felt that frequently in the beginning of the course but not towards the end. It’s always me. I’m not me representing myself. Then I can do anything as it’s always me.”

Another replied:

“I agree with you but I still feel exposed. There are millions of things I can do but still I’m exposed”

I intervened by saying that I agreed with them both. In some ways I think we are always exposing ourselves, because whatever we do we are doing it with our whole selves which is the sum of all our live experiences until this moment. In another way, this level of exposure is banal. It is simply a fact of life. What is maybe more interesting is how oth-
ers interpret our actions and we have little or no control over that. The first speaker then responded:

“I think that’s what I’m trying to say. I don’t anymore see the difference between me talking now or me improvising. If I’m exposed then it’s the same kind of being exposed. There used to be this huge difference between me talking and me dancing. But now I can say whatever or dance whatever but it’s still me.”

I found this exchange interesting in that the first speaker seemed to be expressing having found a growth in confidence by making a connection and narrowing the gap between what they thought of as their dancing persona and their everyday self. Many people agreed that they felt much more confident to improvise in the studio and/or perform improvisation as a result of the course. And not just improvisation:

“The course definitely increased my courage as a performer!”

I was pleased to hear that the course had supported a growing level of confidence that had found a use beyond improvisation. One person added:

“You gave these tools and exercises and that made me feel more confident. That I know what I could do if I wanted to but I don’t have to do that.”

I found this an interesting response since it expressed not only the acquisition of some skills, but also that the choice in whether to exercise them or not had supported their growing confidence too.

“What did you learn? What experiences stand out?”

When I asked this question I was surprised by the rapidity and breadth of the answers that came. For most, they stand on their own and no comment is necessary since they connect very clearly to my explanation in part two this seminar of what I was trying to teach on this course.

“My solutions are not the same as every else. Often I feel that the first thing that comes to mind is predictable and everyone thinks like this. And then I do it and everyone is saying: ‘Oh, you’re doing that.’ And I think to myself: ‘Why didn’t they think of it.’ My mind is not the same as the others and that gave confidence.”

“There was one thing that you said that I really held close to me because it was so good to hear. I feel like we come here every day and try to shape our bodies somehow. But this idea that I don’t always have to be perfectly aligned. To be in these lines that we are taught that we should be. That it’s okay to be like this (slumped) and there’s a reason for it. That you said when we lay on the floor to just lie down and you don’t need to correct yourself. You just lie down. And however you sense yourself is okay. That that’s the feeling of the day and it’s normal to have a different feeling everyday.”
"It was very nice to get this feeling of presence. Of being here. Now. That was the main point of the course for me. Just to be here. And this has come into all the technique classes too."

"The rules made it easier to improvise. The more rules the easier it was."

"Before the demo when you wrote on the pieces of paper some tasks. I had ‘If you don’t know what to do then do something boring’ and that was very helpful. It comes back to me from time to time."

"I’ll always remember the golden rule which was “if you are not getting off, get off”

The group took this aphorism very much to heart and used it as the title for their performance demo on the flyers they produced. I got it from the improviser Chris Aitkin. It was funny to arrive in TEAK one day and see it staring out at me from the notice boards.

"Don’t go in to improvise with an idea to try to make something happen. To live one moment at a time."

"I liked working with you because of the images we worked with. For example, if someone says think about water, or that you are moving in mud, or on a slippery surface, or think about a tree and move like that. Those kind of images don’t work for me. But what we did with you, thinking about your own body, or the relationship to the space or to others, that was really nice”

“One of the most important things you gave for me was that there are always three things happening in the space at the same time. One in the foreground, one in the background and one thing being born or dying.”

“… is always reminding me of the fish body. Every day, it really helps to think that I am here” (gestures to her torso)

And finally, the was a brief exchange on things that the group had learned with me and then used in their warm-up for the performances the evening before:

“A thing is that it’s been so useful before shows to do the sock thing. Last night we did it and then I went into the space and found the connections between the things that were there. And straight away I felt so much better in the space”

“… we did the fish body and that feels good”

“… and we spent time arriving on the floor”

“In what ways was the performance demonstration a learning experience?”

The group clearly understood that it was a very different experience to perform to an audience. One that they enjoyed and found exciting since it presented new challenges.

“Of course it felt different to improvise in front of an audience, perhaps not so free all the time, but on the other hand you can get much energy from the audience.”
And not just energy but:

“The audience definitely influences the improvisation. The audience reaction also leads you somewhere. It leads the whole situation.”

These comments suggest that they experienced being in communication with the audience and therefore that the audience were also participating somehow in the making of the compositions. For some I think that this was a familiar sensation, but for some it was not something that they had thought of before:

“It was new to consider the audience always in the front. I never used to think of the audience. I just did my dance.”

Watching the video afterwards the students had an experience of what I mentioned many times in class:

“I really couldn’t remember what I had done. I couldn’t remember anything. But when I saw myself then it came back to me. I saw some of the things we had practised but I wasn’t thinking of them while doing them. Giving space to the others, reading others movements and diagonals.”

Others expressed surprise at the quality of what they had produced:

“I was really positively surprised, it looked so nice and many parts worked a lot better than I thought. And of course it was also useful to realise if something didn’t work so well.”

A couple of students had tried to repeat in the performance some movements or phrases that they had done earlier in classes. In those moments, they looked to me like the had left the flow of the performance, but it was great that they felt free to try, and better still that they recognised what they had done:

“I saw some things repeated from the class. They worked well last week but they’re not the same any more.”

This raises another question that is outside of my experience to answer, how to dance a set choreography and keep it fresh and alive. But one of the others answered that she was able to take something of what she had learned on the course into this area:

“After the course I had some performances and I definitely have a different feeling on the stage now even in the old familiar dance material. More free, confident, brave and deep.”

One of the core ideas that I was trying to present was that as dancers we don’t need to rely solely on moving in an interesting way to entertain an audience, but we can we can also make use of time and space in interesting compositional ways. In watching the video, One of the students was surprised to identify this:
“I saw a lot of phrasing in the performance. And simple “vanilla” phrases that worked really well.”

Someone said that they thought that you need perfect technique in order to perform well as well as perfect performance presence. I replied that “perfect” was unattainable, and if we did manage to attain it, then it would be a pity since there’d be nothing left to aim for. The only way is down. And what keeps me going is that there’s always something more to learn. I suggested that an idea perfection might be a great thing to use to orient ourselves by, like the moon. If we wait for perfection then we’d never get out of the studio to perform. Picking up on this, one person said:

“I dance in order to be able to perform. I want to be on stage. And I’m not that interested in finding movement in dance classes. I’m there to learn to dance to perform. And improvised performance offers the same opportunity. I liked it very much because I always like to perform. I do everything to perform.”

This was an interesting comment since it proposed the possibility to get better at performing by doing it. As well as raising issues of the difference between dancing and performing, and the fundamental question of why we want to perform.

Finally, a couple of students commented that it had been very useful to come and watch me perform at a gig I had had during the course with our musician:

“We saw these tasks from the classes put into action. And we see what didn’t work.”

The gig they saw was one where the performers, in this case three dancers and three musicians, meet just a couple of hours before the performance, not necessarily ever having met before. One of the dancers was an old friend who I had improvised with for many years, the other I’d never met before. As it turned out, this other dancer was not such an experienced improviser and remained onstage all the time. The students said it was interesting to see how we worked with that and learned a lot from observing the difficulty that it had created. I’d actually forgotten that this performance had coincided with the course.

I was happy that they had had a taste of live improvised performance for themselves and thought that the course might have been less significant for them had it not culminated in this performance demonstration.

“How did the course effect the group?”

It seemed to me during the course, and I also heard then from some of the students, that one function that the classes had fulfilled was to allow them to get to know each other
better. I wanted to know if, looking back, they thought this was true and how it had worked. One student said:

“We hadn’t really sat and talked together before. We come here and do technique classes together and we see each other maybe at lunchtime and talk a bit and then we go home. Now sometimes it’s a bit different, but before I felt that we never really got together where we were something other than the dancer identity,“

I asked if we weren’t also dancers in my class also but she explained that there was something about the nature of the improvisation classes that they really got to see each other as individuals. Another went further:

“Since in improvisation you have the opportunity to do anything, whatever you do there’s a lot of you in your doing. Of course that’s the same whenever you are dancing. But I think improvising reveals something that is typical of you. When we started your classes we didn’t know each other well as a group. We got to know each other by moving rather than talking.”

She went on to describe that there was something about dancing together, but in their own styles, that enabled them to get to know each other in as deep a way as asking about our backgrounds, families etc. This is something I also feel to be true and reveals something about the power of dance and movement to communicate. I think improvisation creates a particularly strong frame for this since it invites and welcomes difference and individuality while at the same time emphasising meeting and creating something together. I think it is also a very efficient way to get to know each other as evidenced by this comment:

“I can say that thanks to this course it took us much less time to become as a group. We got a chance to see each other as individuals. There appeared real connections between us.”

I think again that working towards the performance also strengthened the impetus for the group to bond together.

“I think our group as a whole learned to listen to each other and give space for things to develop. At the end everybody was really concentrating to create something nice together and I think we worked well as a group.”

And from this, maybe also the fact that we spent so much time listening to each other was yet another layer of support for the group process.
Summing up

I enjoyed teaching this course and have also found it fruitful in some ways to reflect on it through the act of writing about it in this form. My biggest regret, it is that I couldn’t get more feedback from the students by email and that we couldn’t spend more than this one hour reflecting back on the course together. There were many more questions that I wanted to ask, and what they did say could prompt many more follow up questions and dialogue. Still, I take away a lot of food for thought and inspiration that I will surely carry over into my next improvisation course and beyond.

What stands out for me as line of possible further research is the question of how much the students were able to integrate the work on exploration, improvisation and performance that I offered into the larger context of their studies within a professional contemporary dance education. That they learned something from the course which they found useful is not in question, nor I think that they left the course with a much wider understanding of and respect for improvisation as a field of study.

What also comes across strongly is that the course played a significant role in supporting the bonding together of the group. I know that that is something that previous year groups at TEAK have found problematic, on occasions spectacularly so. The act of improvising together created an environment, by all accounts very different from that which they had experienced in other class situations where, as one student put it: “We got to know each other by moving rather than talking.” From my own experience, that they said this doesn’t surprise me since finding a way to be together while remaining true to ourselves is one of the strengths of improvisation as a practice. Another key feature is the concept that in watching someone improvise, we are watching their thought processes in action in their body. In other words, we see their mind in action.

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, the originator of Body Mind Centering, expressed the significance of movement and its potential as a mode of inquiry into the nature of the self as follows:

*Our body moves as our mind moves. The qualities of any movement are a manifestation of how mind is expressing through the body at the moment. Changes in movement qualities indicate that the mind has shifted focus in the body. Conversely, when we direct the mind or attention to different areas of the body and initiate movement from those areas, we change the quality of our movement. So we find that movement can be a way to observe the expression of mind through the body, and it can also be a way to affect changes in the body-mind relationship.* (1993; p1)
I’m not sure how many of the students fully understood the implications nor the full potential of that in relation to deepening their appreciation of their art form, no matter what their preference in style.

The biggest remaining question for me however, as evidenced by some of their comments above, is how much they identified what I was doing with them as dance. For me it clearly was dance but for them I think there was a tendency to accept and enjoy the classes by regarding them as something different. I think that in seeking the answer to this question, the research would need to radiate out from the classroom to include further consideration of the institution, dance culture and the wider culture in general. I was heartened by the comments of the course director who visited a class and came to see the performance in which he expressed his satisfaction with the work that I had done with the students, saying that he would like to include more improvisation in the curriculum.

For all the shortcomings in the data gathering, the reflection in part three was rewarding both to write and also now to read. In how I approached my account of the course in part two, I am not nearly so satisfied. Both the subject matter and my expectations were more complex. But out of my dissatisfaction comes inspiration.

As stated in the introduction, my way of teaching is highly improvisational and research orientated. I do keep notes after classes but never make plans before. When I reflect back on my experience of teaching this course, I remember myself having ideas, a wide palette of exercises from which to choose and the curiosity to experiment endlessly to create explorations, exercises and variations. I feel like the knowledge or material is organised within me, not statically, but in an organic way. In the act of teaching, it always came out differently and the differences are there for many diverse reasons: the dialogue that I entered into with the students, the information I gave to them and the information they gave back in return; where my own interests took me, intentional or associative; new information that came to me outside class, whole, like a book, or as a fragment, like a quote; things I sought out and things I found in my metaphorical pocket; new sensations, deliberate, as a result of experimenting with some well considered connection I noticed in myself, or by chance, slipping over and hurting my knee one day.

In setting it down what happened as I did in a linear fashion and trying to make some neat if open-ended sense of it, I don’t feel like I got beyond straightforward documentation. That has some value and I was surprised at just how well resourced my teaching was. In reflecting on my description of how I put the course together, what emerged was sur-
prisisingly coherent. But worryingly so. I missed the sense of interconnection between the topics that I dealt with. While there is a lot of detail present, there is much more that went missing in the effort to condense the experience in the course of fulfilling the linear narrative. What did make it through seems in many ways to have done so arbitrarily. While one thing leads narratively onwards to another, many more others fell aside. It’s not just these details I miss, but what lurks in the spaces between them. That I like to write with rigour is not a question. I always write my classes up after the fact, but my notes contain as much why and how as what, together with countless tangential fragments that I pick up, not least from listening to my students. My teaching in this respect is an ongoing web of research and, like a spider, I criss-cross my expanding web.

While it has been interesting to reflect on my practice in this form, the main question I am left with is not should I set it down in words, but what form would serve those words best to promote truly interconnected reflection. For one thing, my words like to be spoken as much as written and read. And they enjoy the company of pictures, both still and moving. Maybe I could have found a better paper-based form, but I feel drawn towards the 21st century electronic media, which offers the power of the hyper link to multimedia, would suit my way of thinking better. I wonder how it could be used as a research tool.

In the dance world, one model might be Steve Paxton’s Material For The Spine DVD ROM (2008) in which he presents, contextualises, critiques and shares his insights into his research through an indexed collection of lectures, demonstrations, classes, commentaries, animations and interviews – around 4.5 hours of material in different formats. His research is both rigourous and idiosyncratic. For example, there is a video of him standing on a glass table filmed from below and all we can see are the weight shifts of the feet in contact with the glass as they adapt to the body’s small dance of standing above. While simple, it is I think a work of genius. When I saw it for the first time it was if I could feel the connections growing in my brain. I saw something that I’d studied and built up an intimate relationship with over 18 years, but through my internal sensation only. In the act of seeing it for the first time, I understood more not only about standing, but about understanding. My physical sensation was of a flood of visual information feeding into the neurological learning loop. And the funny thing is that I got it, through Steve’s virtual eye. Standing under him, I understood something about understanding.

But the model which inspires me most is, paradoxically, a book. The Art of Looking Sideways by Alan Fletcher. Described on the inner cover as: “A primer in visual intelli-
gence, an exploration of the workings of the eye, the hand, the brain and the imagination ... concerned with the interplay between the verbal and the visual, and the limitless resources of the human mind.” (Fletcher, 2001) What I find remarkable about this book is that it fulfils this promise as much by its design, its form, as by its content. I don’t so much read it or look at it, as experience and engage with it. It’s full of information, but the design creates an experience more pertinent to the content than the content itself. Medium as message and message as medium. Of course, Fletcher is a graphic designer, but while his art lives on the page, it seems to fully acknowledge, engage and activate his reader experientially. And as Einstein said: “Learning is experience. Everything else is just information.” Fletcher notes in his brief introduction to the book: “Most books written on visual matters are authored by those who analyse rather than experience. Many are hard work and littered with academic jargon – autistic tendencies, cognitive expectancy, formative causation. They are concerned with the mechanics rather than the thoughts, with the match rather than the fire.” (2002; p2)

I feel that in writing part two this seminar paper, I have slipped up on “autistic tendencies, cognitive expectancy, formative causation” in attempting to shoe-horn my account into this form. I feel it went no further than my regular after class note taking, and in fact took some steps backwards by being overworked. They serve me well, but I feel like in order to interrogate them, to seduce hidden meaning from them, to charm what lurks there into the open in a form (besides the classes themselves) that might contribute to the larger discourse, a further transformation is required. I am left wondering what form I could create that would do that and fully support me in my ongoing research. Some form that would not be solely representative or reflexive, but also generative, and through which I could share not just information but an experience of what it is that I am concerned with. Playing with matches doesn’t warm my heart-mind.
Appendix

Example Of A Movement Exploration Class: The Vertical Axis

What follows is the first exploration class that I taught as part of the course. It is broken down into three parts.

INITIAL GUIDED EXPLORATION (30-45 mins)

1. walking – feeling the feet on the floor – noticing the action of the feet in walking – the ankles – the knees – the hip joints – the tail – the vertebrae of the lower back – the middle back – the lower breastbone – the vertebrae of the upper back – the upper part of the breastbone – the shoulders – the arms – the hands – the base of the neck – the head – the eyes – noticing how the floor moves as we walk – the walls – the ceiling – the world around us

2. standing – how relaxed can we be in standing without falling over? – noticing how standing still is not standing still but is full of movement – observing how the body knows how to stand – without interfering, noticing how we experience moments of being in balance, falling off balance, and how the reflexes fire to bring us back to balance without conscious direction

We consider how weight is not something that we possess but is something that passes through us dynamically, streaming down our bones continuously, and gives us the direction down. How this downward force is balanced by an equal and opposite counter-force (Newton’s Third Law Of Motion) which I call support coming in through the feet and exiting through the top of the head, giving us the direction up.

We look for an alignment of the bones which allows us to stand with minimum muscular effort, stacking them up like children’s building blocks. This is not something to force or try too hard at, since efforting takes us away from relaxed standing. We are not looking to get it right, or be perfect, but opening up a dialogue with the sensation of standing so that we can track it from day to day, becoming aware of how it changes on good and bad days

3. walking – noticing how it feels different after watching ourselves stand – seeing if we can begin to track the action of the spine in walking – noticing where we first focus – where along the spine it is easy to bring the attention and where it is not
4. looking at the skeleton – noticing the bodies of the spine – how they sit in front of that part of the spine that we can touch – how in the chest area they rest inside the chest cavity – thinking of the vertebrae like frying pans, the handle being like the processes and the pan like the vertebral bodies – how the bodies do the work of transmitting the forces while the processes provide the attachments for the muscles which move the vertebrae

5. standing – shifting the weight forwards and backwards, looking for the position where it feels like the bodies can do their work of transmitting the upwards and downwards forces – clarifying this place by sensing when it’s not right – when the weight comes to far backwards or forwards and we feel the musculature at the front or the back of the body called into action to support us – sensing how mobility is compromised in these positions, how we stiffen up

6. walking – sensing the action of the spine in walking – noticing any if it is clearer now after attending to the bodies of the vertebrae – noticing the turning/twisting action of the spine in walking

7. standing – noticing the sense of there being a virtual centre axis that divides the body left and right, front and back – sensing the relationship between the axis and the spine – beginning to explore looking a little to one side and the other – letting the rest of the body follow to support this – turning around this vertical axis – the idea is to maintain this sense of the vertical axis while turning

8. looking at an image of the vertical axis – noticing how the axis is shown as forward of the spine – how the front of the lumbar (lower back) and cervical (neck) touch the axis

9. standing – noticing if having looked at the image changes the sensation of the vertical axis – if it makes it clearer – this axis is not real but is more like the sum of all the different vectors of forces passing through all the bones of the body

10. walking – noticing how we talk the vertical axis with us as we walk – how we’re at home in the vertical axis – this is unique to humans – noticing any sense of turning around the vertical axis in walking – noticing the difference between sensing the vertical axis and the spine in walking

11. standing – exploring turning from the eyes again – where along the spine do we feel we get most rotation? – more specifically, do we get more rotation through the lumbar or thoracic (chest) vertebrae?

The group is split roughly 60:40 in favour of the thoracic spine. We gather to look at the skeleton to have a look. I explain that from the structure of the facets of the thoracic vs. lumbar, it is clear that turning in the lumbar spine is more restricted due to the roughly sagittal orientation of the facets. In the text books (Calais-Germain, 1993; p49-61), there is said to be less than 1° rotation between lumbar vertebrae while there is around 3° rota-
tion in the thoracic spine. That makes $5 \times 1° = 5°$ maximum rotation in the lumbar spine while there is $12 \times 3° = 36°$ rotation in the thoracic spine. This can seem counterintuitive since it makes some sense to imagine that the rib attachments to the spine might inhibit rotation.

The facets of the cervical (neck) region are generally similar to that to of thorax but allow even more rotation – around $6 \times 8° = 48°$ in total.

We also look at the configuration of the joints of the skull and the top of the neck (occipital condyles, atlas and axis). How the “yes” movement of the head (articulation of the occipital condyles on the atlas) can be sensed to be happening slightly above the “no” movement (articulation of the atlas on the axis). The “no” movement affords around $40°$ rotation.

12. standing – exploring small “yes” and “no” movements of the head – making small movements and alternating between one and the other in order to sense how these occur at slightly different levels in the spine

13. focusing on the side-to-side “no” movement – staying organised around the vertical axis – letting the turning grow and begin to spread down the spine to involve more and more vertebra – sensing the rotation in different parts of the spine – noticing how it might be easier to turn to one side then the other

14. without losing the organisation around the vertical axis, beginning to come into a gentle rhythmic swinging from side to side – exploring how it is different to initiate this turning from different parts of the body: eyes, nose, shoulders, arms, hands, top of the breastbone, spine between the shoulders, bottom of the breastbone, lumbar spine (belly centre), tail, hip joints, knees, ankles, soles of the feet – noticing how each different initiation feels and looks a little different – many different ways of doing this simple looking movement when we look into it in detail

15. noticing how some people shift the axis from side to side in this movement while others leave it central – more variation – exploring shifting the axis to the back foot in turning – noticing how this suggests one kind of turn – exploring shifting the axis to the front foot in turning – noticing how this suggests another kind of turn – exploring leaving the axis central – noticing the differences between all and personal preferences between these – again realising how many different ways there are of doing this seemingly simple movement

16. simply standing and noticing the sense of the vertical axis now

17. walking – again noticing how we talk the vertical axis with us as we walk – noticing any sense of turning around the vertical axis in walking – noticing the difference between sensing the vertical axis and the spine in walking – if it is getting any clearer now
FELDENKRAIS AWARENESS THROUGH MOVEMENT (ATM) CLASS (45 mins)

Turning Around The Centre Axis Lying On The Back – This ATM is built up from simple movements of turning the head, pelvis, shoulder girdle and eyes. The class begins and ends with the simple reference movement of rolling the head left and right. As it progresses it explores more and more complex co-ordinations, particularly those involving differentiated movements of the eyes which are very challenging for everyone.

The reorganisation that takes place in this class is often expressed as a clearer sensation of the vertical axis, feeling taller, lighter or heavier, greater ease in turning, smoother walking. I find this a great class to teach to a group where not everyone is familiar with the Feldenkrais Method. The simple component movements are pleasurable in themselves and can be used to introduce various principles of the method:

• move as much as is comfortable not as much as you can: by making movements well within the range of what is possible for us and beginning to explore the question what is comfortable we can move without stress and strain – the more relaxed we are when moving the more we are able to listen to ourselves as we move – to notice the sensations that pass through our whole selves while moving

• if you are looking to feel a connection between two widely separate parts, for example between the head and tail in this class, then try moving smaller and listening deeper rather than making the movement bigger to force a mechanical connection – in the method we look to move with greater and greater ease – grace one could say – it is this graceful quality that separates the great sports stars (Usain Bolt), dancers (Fred Astaire), etc, from the rest – trying harder then takes us in the opposite direction from that quality which we seek to enhance

• to take rests whenever you need them and to work with the movements whenever they interest you – as soon as a movement becomes tiring, mechanical or simply boring then stop and have a rest – in the method it’s not often the movements that are tiring but the act of paying attention while moving – there is nothing to be gained in the method from repeating movements mindlessly – it is all about moving mindfully – likewise if a rest is called but you are deeply interested in something then continue – the idea is that the spoken instructions are a guide to an exploration of an idea rather than orders to be followed

• if you start to feel more open in the rests between movement explorations, sometimes strangely so, then try to be with this feeling and avoid stretching or shaking yourself out – this feeling of more openness is one of the signs that something is reorganising within oneself – the feeling of change, particularly when standing at the end of a class can be quite disorientating – the feeling of change will pass but one of the
best ways to benefit from the class is to try to live inside the change for as long as possible after the class – and one way to disperse the feeling is to stretch or shake out which will bring you back to a more familiar pattern of organisation – try to take any new/strange/different sensations as an invitation to experience yourself, and hence the world around you, differently

One final point that I find comes up again and again with everyone, but is especially strong in dancers, is the assumption that one ought to be symmetrical. Most Feldenkrais ATMs begin with a moment lying on the back scanning oneself for sensation and I often notice people correcting how they lie on the floor in order to make themselves lie more symmetrically. Often there is feeling that something is wrong because we assume that if all is well then we should lie symmetrically. Some even feel guilty or bad for not being symmetrical.

It is important to realise that while we all, dancers especially, strive for functional symmetry, this is not our natural starting point. We are all fundamentally asymmetrical, both in our structure and everyday function. The way our internal organs are arranged is asymmetrical, the most commonly recognised being the heart which is set a little to the left side in most people. And we are nearly all right- or left-handed, truly ambidextrous people are extremely rare. So asymmetry is our starting point and there’s no need to feel bad for being asymmetrical.

The Feldenkrais method works through becoming more and more aware of what we are doing. Feldenkrais often summed up his method by saying, “if you know what you are doing then you can do what you want”. Asymmetry is a simple fact of life for the vast majority of us. Trying to correct it consciously only adds another layer of unnecessary muscle activity. Truly interesting and useful change that can occur with the method is that which occurs unconsciously, in other words, when our systems self-correct themselves.

SELF-DIRECTED EXPLORATION (45 mins)
When people come to stand up at the end of the ATM everyone feels like some change has taken place. Some spontaneously begin to gently explore turning around the axis and I encourage the rest to follow. We come into walking, noticing both the vertical axis and the spine in walking. For many, the walking is more fluid, easier and lighter. I recall a dance teacher saying that “if you can walk you can dance” and offer my take which would be “if you can walk better then you can dance better”.
Many people also feel strange. Not quite themselves. I show a selection of walks initiated from different parts of the body, each suggesting a different personality that we each read easily and instantly. To me this demonstrates how personality and posture, mind and body, are intimately linked.

Before giving time for personal exploration I offer the following general guidelines for self-directed exploration:

• whatever you do, do it gently – to maximise the benefit from the ATM it is good to work inside the feeling rather than try to explore at the edges – to go to the edge of what you feel is possible, even though in this open state you may feel like more is possible than normal, will at best quickly dissipate this feeling and at worst leave you open to injury – going to the edge of what is possible, one’s system may “tighten up” or “brace itself” in order to protect and the feeling of change is lost – or if this doesn’t happen then there’s the possibility to injure oneself

• It’s a bit like getting your car back from the garage after the brakes and clutch are replaced. It’s definitely still your car, but it drives differently and you need to take care while you get used to how it feels now.

• begin eyes closed exploring the theme – in this case turning around the axis – spend some time gently exploring the theme of the class

• open eyes exploring the theme – allowing yourself to be more conscious of the space around you, notice how this adds information to the exploration of the theme – now you can see what others are doing feel free to borrow movements – no need to do what anyone else is doing

• if exploring the theme opens a door to some other movement that interests you then follow that – after exploring the theme for a while some other movement may suggest itself, feel free to follow that with an option to return to the theme or else move on to something else – the important thing is that you are interested in what you are exploring

We end by walking again, exaggerating the turning in walking then returning to a “normal” walk (much laughter at this suggestion since walking is different for most).

And finally in standing, I ask how we would choose to divide the world in two after exploring this vertical axis and the near instant response is into up and down

**homework** – to notice what it is to be vertical – to notice moments when we organise our perceptions of the world into up and down – to notice moments of feeling at home in the vertical axis
Example Of An Improvisation Exercise: The “Popcorn” Score

This is the exercise that I began the study of improvisation with.¹⁹

1. Starting sitting in a circle – going around the circle the first task is simply to say our name and stand, and then when our turn comes around to say our name and sit. For what follows it is necessary to be clear that first we say our names and then we move. As the game continues it can get faster.

Very simply this game encourages listening to others as the timing of our movements is dependent on others. It also encourages simplicity and clarity

2. Next we continue to speak our name then either stand or sit but in any order and with any timing. The effect is a bit like popcorn popping in a pan.

Within these very restricted rules, the idea of making a group composition through improvisation is introduced. We make decisions individually on when to act based on listening to the group composition as it unfolds, incorporating moments ranging from stillness to frenzied activity. At first it seems that many people find it too simple and too restrictive, but once we find a way to accept this then we settle into what I think is a the simple human pleasures of play and pattern making. It’s fun.

3. Next, after saying our names can move to different places in the room.

At first people make a lot of use of the edges, sitting on chairs or hiding behind curtains. This again seems typically human, at least in our culture at this time – the urge to be creative by stretching the rules to the limits, literally to go to the edge of what is possible.

4. I make a new rule that the edges are out of bounds and give the image of the space as a canvas with our movement from place to place as brushstrokes.

Now the attention is brought to relationships within the group in open space. From a simple beginning, many choices are now possible: whether to plan where to go in the space or not before saying our name and setting off; how quickly or slowly to go from one place to another; what pathway to take through the space from one space to another; what method of locomotion, to walk or run or dance. As the game continues I introduce these options one-by-one these and the play becomes more free.

5. A further rule is that we can say not only our our name before moving but the name of anyone else in the group. We move whenever we hear our name. We have some measure of control – we can call our own name – and also have to give up control – move when hear our own name being called by others.
For this to work, people need to drop into an even greater level of listening. When the group have settled into this, I split the group in two so we can have time to see what is happening. I also construct a stage space for the play to happen in and sit the watching half of the group along an audience line. What emerges in this structure are the basic issues of dance composition – something about human bodies moving in time and space – and the larger question: “what does dance do?”

In watching something like this, we can begin to answer that question by noticing and analysing moments that stand out as effecting us – “aha” moments – moments that “touch” us or “move” us. I think that in the act of watching each other work and recognise these moments, we develop our personal aesthetics. These aesthetics are something outside language, they can be felt directly in the body while watching. They are visceral. But in discussing afterwords moments that attracted us, we can begin to learn to speak about them. The act of being able to speak about them is another important skill that begins to develop. There is also I think a connection between being able to see things and being able to do them oneself. That watching movement is an important part of learning movement. My own experience is that many times I have heard people describe things that I couldn’t see or do myself. Sometimes I have learned to do them, and then I can see them. Other times I first see them, and then am able to do them.

Another thing that starts to surface is that people have different habits of moving and calling names. By recognising this as a watchers one can begin to notice what we do ourselves and try on the habits of others. In other words, we begin to learn from each other.

Whenever I get to watching each other, going up on stage group by group, I make clear that the task is not to be good but to learn. Trying to be good introduces the risk of failure, trying to learn values the mistakes as much as the successes. Learning is happening in both groups. The group that watches first builds on the group before. I emphasis this by saying sometimes that the task for the movers is to construct an experience from which the watchers can learn.

6. The final part of the exercise is simply to repeat the previous part but in silence. Now the task is to imagine calling and hearing one’s name.

Now, in addition to action and reaction, anticipation is added into the mix. In watching, what becomes clear is that we are observing a process of individual decision making – a process of thinking through the body – that leads to a group composition.
I finally played some music while the groups worked with this silent call score with the result that what we ended up with was recognisable as a dance – a group composition. What is built into this exercise implicitly that makes it so readable as dance is phrasing.
References


Endnotes

1 Throughout the text I make reference to my background in dance as post-modern, I do this in order to distinguish it from Finnish contemporary dance. What contemporary dance is is hotly debated and not altogether clear, it also varies by country. What passes for contemporary dance in the US might be described as modern dance by a central European. To confuse matter still further, what I am calling post-modern dance is what used to be called new dance in the eighties. And now, as what was once called post-modern dance has gone more mainstream, in some countries at least, it is now often simply regarded as contemporary dance. To attempt to clarify this in the body of the text seemed not essential in the context of this seminar paper and to do it full justice would require a seminar paper itself.

2 "Soma" is simply a Greek word for the living body. Somatics was a term first introduced by Tomas Hanna when he founded The Somatics Magazine – Journal Of The Bodily Arts And Sciences in 1977. The word Somatics is used to designate the approach to a way of working with the body where the body is experienced from within rather than objectified from without. The implication is that when the body is experienced from within then the body and mind are not separated but experienced as a whole. In Hanna's own words (from Johnson, D.H., (ed) 1995, p341): “Somatics is the field which studies the soma: namely the body as perceived from within by first-person perception. When a human being is observed from the outside — ie, from a third-person viewpoint — the phenomenon of a human body is perceived. But, when this same human being is observed from the first-person viewpoint of his own proprioceptive senses, a categorically different phenomenon is perceived: the human soma.” The field of somatics is vast and spans many areas of study: health, education, performing arts, psychology and philosophy to name but a few. Individual disciplines can be described as somatic in approach (Johnson, D. H, (ed) 1995), for example: the Alexander Technique, Rosen Therapy, Rolfing, Feldenkrais Method, Body-Mind Centering, the work of Elsa Gindler, Mabel Todd, Ideokinesis, Authentic Movement, Classical Osteopathy, Eutony, Reichian Therapy as well as many non-western disciplines such as Chi Gung, Aikido, some forms of yoga and meditation etc. What unites these individual disciplines share is a holistic, first-person view of the body and mind.

3 Salford University, Manchester, UK. Performance Workshop Project, 5-21 March 2001

4 For example, see Julyen Hamiltion http://www.julyenhamilton.com accessed February 2009


6 See http://www.rosas.be accessed February 2009


9 Fool Time Circus and Performing Arts School, which later became Circomedia, see http://www.circomedia.com accessed February 2009.


12 Details of both Awareness Perception Presence and BodySchool courses can be found on my own web site at http://www.movetolearn.com

13 Steve Paxton, Julyen Hamilton, Simone Forti, Katie Duck, and David Zambrano to name but a few of the most prominent teachers of dance improvisation
14 This makes perfect logical sense when talked through but many dancers feel bad somehow (guilty even) when they lie on the floor and realise that they are not symmetrical – over my years of teaching many people have thanked me for relieving them of this bad feeling.

15 From Mary Fulkerson

16 This principle parallels that was elucidated by the renowned design teacher Rowena Reed Kiostellow as the relationship between the dominant, subdominant and subordinate (Hannah, G. G. 2002) and which formed a central role in her compositional exercises.

17 From Simone Forti

18 From Chris Aitkin

19 This is an exercise that I learned and from Eva Karzczag and have since expanded on.