

# On teaching contact improvisation

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*I was recently asked if I'd like to write something about teaching contact improvisation and I remembered that I already had. Back in 2009 for my masters degree. When I read it I realised it would be good to share it on since many of the issues that I cover in it seem even more relevant today.*

## **A brief history of Contact Improvisation**

Contact Improvisation is an improvisational dance form that has its roots in the early history of what has come to be known as post-modern dance (Banes, S. 1987). The form grew out of a performance score called Magnesium, developed by Steve Paxton in the 1972, that was rooted in an exploration of how two bodies can improvise freely with a shared point of contact. Subsequently, he gathered together a group of dancers who worked intensively together before presenting the work again to an audience, this time under the name Contact Improvisations (CQ 1997; p2).

Described by Simone Forti when she first observed it as an "art-sport" (Novack, C. J. 1990; p191), many who saw the early performances were so taken by what they saw that they wanted to learn how to do it themselves. Since then it has grown into postmodern dance genre of its own, attracting enthusiasts from many different fields who practice in many countries worldwide (Novack, C. J. 1990). The performance origins of the form have largely given way to an interest in practising the form in what are known as "contact jams". These jams attract a wide range of participants, from those who identify themselves as professional dancers to those whose interest is purely recreational.

Many dance educations include contact improvisation to some extent in their curriculum, since the skills it both requires and develops through its practice are regarded as increasingly necessary and beneficial in the preparation of young dancers. The skills can broadly be described as those alignment, release, partnering, improvisation, and training of the reflexes.

The emergence of contact improvisation is credited by some as inspiring and influencing the partnering skills of contemporary dance that emerged from the 1980s (DV8, Wim van de Keybus). Much has been written elsewhere about the history and development of contact improvisation (Albright A. C. & Gere, D. (eds.). 2003; Banes, S. 1987; Koteen, D. & Smith N. S. 2008; Novack, C. J. 1990). This introduction is brief and glosses over much. The concern of this essay is how contact improvisation is learned and how it is taught.

## **Personal CI History**

I first came across contact improvisation in 1991. I was studying physical theatre and took a weekend workshop with Laurie Booth. I was instantly hooked and sought out learning opportunities with as many teachers as I could find. I practised the form at contact improvisation jams. I studied at the SNDO (School For New Dance Development) in Amsterdam where contact improvisation was offered as part of the regular programme technique classes.

In 1996, I was lucky enough to study contact improvisation for a month with Steve Paxton who originated the form. These days he rarely teaches the form itself, but rather a body of work

sourced from contact improvisation that he calls Material For The Spine (Paxton, S. 2008) that I later studied with him too. And I also count myself lucky to have studied regularly since 1994, and later collaborated, corresponded and dialogued with, Nancy Stark Smith (Koteen, D. & Smith N. S. 2008).

She was the person who first suggested I teach the form and for this I am immensely grateful since it provided me with my first impetus to teach any form of movement. Her advice was that if I wanted to get better at dancing contact improvisation then I should teach it, and teach it to beginners. I did, it worked, and since engaging in this process, all my teaching has been oriented around this idea that through teaching others I facilitate my own learning.

My interest in the form has changed considerably over the years. I'm old enough to have watched many people who have been students in my classes at one time or another go on to become teachers of the form themselves. (Helsinki has an exceptionally large and committed community of contact improvisation dancers.) To some extent I see a similar pattern of changing interest in them as I have traced in myself.

Broadly speaking in the early years of dancing the form I was more oriented towards developing the skills (technical and sensory, although as I emphasise later they are inseparable) in order to become comfortable dancing at any level or speed. During this period I was quite choosy about partners, looking for those whose level of skill I thought matched or exceeded my own. Later on, when those skills were no longer an issue, my interests opened more to issues of improvisation and how to meet another through touch and movement.

What follows is based on my reflection on my own process of learning contact improvisation, and of that of my peers, my students and ex-students.

## The Development Of Contact Improvisation

*"When an apple fell on his head, Isaac Newton was inspired to describe his three laws of motion. These became the foundation of our ideas about physics. Being essentially objective, Newton ignored what it feels like to be the apple. When we get our mass in motion, we rise above the constant call of gravity toward the swinging, circling invitation of centrifugal force. Dancers ride and play these forces. Beyond Newton's third law, we discover that for every action several equal and opposite reactions are possible. Therein lies an opportunity for improvisation."*

Steve Paxton, *Fall After Newton* (Videoda, 1987)

The video *Fall After Newton* traces the first 11 years of the development of contact improvisation (1972-83). It is fascinating to watch the development of the form from its inception. The early experiments that we see look clumsy and rough. As Paxton states in the commentary: "At first there seemed to be only two options. Trying to follow the flow of communication or resisting it." There is footage of dancers literally hurling themselves at each other with an old wrestling mat underneath to cushion the falls.

We also see the dancers calmly, almost meditatively, practising standing: “The reflexive dance of one’s bones”. Paxton makes clear the connection between these two seemingly divergent practices. He speaks of re-training the reflexes to survive the adrenalised states in the heat of the dance. “The support needed from the unconscious reflexive parts of the brain is more present when the conscious mind is not afraid. The calmness of (the reflexive act of) standing extended into the fall.”

As the form develops, the moments of contact become extended and what emerges is a dance with a more continuous flow. “While in contact we attend to our own reflexes which have been stimulated by the other’s movements. Our reflexes move us and this causes our partner to move. This cycle of movement responses is continuous and forms the basis of the dialogue.”

These early explorations culminated in a series of performances called *Contact Improvisations*. The nature of the performances was improvisational. One could say that the composition was emergent. It emerged from the parameters of the investigation of “what it feels like to be the apple”. A dance of the reflexes responding to the physics of the situation: “Each dance is a series of on the spot decisions. And they are on the spot. The soft skin is alert to the points of contact, signals telling the dancers where they are, orienting them to their partner and the floor.”

Summing up the preparation that the dancers underwent, Paxton states: “The main focus of training is re-tuning the senses. It isn’t just the sense of touch which must be expanded but all the senses must become elastic enough to navigate through spherical space, to handle any position, any change of acceleration.”

Later, in an article written in 1991 entitled *Drafting Interior Techniques* (1) in which Paxton describes at length the somatic nature of the education of a contact dancer, he comments: “Contact improvisation behavior evolves from sensing movement; dance and sports from attempting movement and then letting the senses fall into line, or not.”

## Learning And Teaching Contact Improvisation

Making an abrupt jump-cut to the present, contact improvisation as it is most often practised is largely a recreational dance form practised all over the world (2). An early decision not to formalise the teaching of contact improvisation teachers (3) means that anyone who is moved to teach can teach the form. The thinking behind this, in keeping with the egalitarian aspirations of its origin (Novack, C. J. 1990), is that the form can continue to grow and mutate alongside the investigations of its practitioners, and that teachers will attract students to their classes on the strength of their practice, or not.

Over the course of the development of contact improvisation, an identifiable movement vocabulary has emerged. So much so that I am often led to question how much improvisation is actually left in the form we still call contact improvisation. What I see often is people practising what seems to be a series of known moves with each other, the improvisational reduced to the order of their combination – I call this IKEA contact. Another variation is people

practicing the rolling point of contact and telling me that that is “real CI”; to me rolling point of contact was always an exercise to prepare for dancing CI.

As the vocabulary of the dance emerged over time, so did a vocabulary of teaching it, a ready-made vocabulary that was largely absent from the investigations out of which the form emerged:

*Current students of contact are often surprised to learn that the earliest training sessions of contact improvisation with Steve included only about three or four kinds of preparations, such as the “small dance” (standing), rolling practice, stretches, throws and catches, and head-to-head dances, and otherwise lots of hours doing and watching the duet contact improvisations spontaneously danced by the participants. None of the now familiar exercises of “tables”, “posts”, “bridges”, “rolling point of contact”, “spirals”, “surfing”, “finger ouija”, “sluffing/sliding”, specific lifts, shoulder “orbits”, or other movement patterns later isolated for teaching.*

Nancy Stark Smith (4)

The “familiar exercises” mentioned are the staple of many classes that I first began teaching myself and have also observed in taking the classes of others. Such exercises developed for good reasons. They accelerate the development of individual learning and introduce a vocabulary that partners can quickly practise with each other without having to undergo the exhaustive investigation of the pioneers of the form.

There is a catch however. It is, somewhat ironically, the same one that Paxton elucidated in *Drafting Interior Techniques* quoted earlier; that when the form is taught through these exercises, the learning is often approached not first and foremost by “sensing movement”, but from “attempting movement and then letting the senses fall into line, or not.” In this way, the learning of contact improvisation comes to mirror that of traditional dance and sports, rather than offering a radically different pathway as was intended.

Taught well, and I take my experience as a student of both Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith among others as my references, these “familiar exercises” are presented as containers in which students can familiarise themselves with specific sensations or principals that, once grasped, can be employed freely in improvisation. Without such attention to the “interior techniques” however, these exercises run the risk of merely instilling empty forms devoid of any awareness of associated sensations. They are then employed in open dancing simply as formulaic “moves” or “tricks”, performed without the characteristic calmness of mind and body of a skilled contact practitioner.

The aforementioned pitfalls inherent in the presentation of these “familiar forms” are not solely the responsibility of the teacher. We live in a culture that seems to me to be increasingly biased towards privileging the visual as a means to gathering information about the world around us. Although this visual perceptual bias (oculocentricity) is something which entering the culture of contact improvisation can provide some antidote to, very often the prospective student first encounters the form by watching it at a jam. What they may first notice, and

maybe what attracts them to follow through this initial interest, are the more spectacular expressions of the form, for example the sight of adults joyfully “flying” around each other’s shoulders (5). What is not seen is what is being sensed and what is being enacted internally by the dancers. If I had a penny for every time I was asked by a beginner, “can you teach me to fly?” ...

Attempting to learn contact improvisation from this place of ambition is in fact one of the major obstacles to be overcome in learning the form (6). As a teacher, one of the tasks I feel repeatedly called upon to do is to attempt to replace students’ ambition with the sensory curiosity necessary to acquire the skills that will eventually empower them to “fly” effortlessly. The explorations that I propose are not spectacular. I attempt to replace any disappointment at the postponement of the achievement of their ambitions by the pleasure of the exploration, at least in those that stay with it.

Another characteristic of our western culture is that it is steeped in the Protestant work ethic that can be characterised by terms like “hard work” and “no pain, no gain”. We feel like we need to “try hard” to achieve something. This is also at odds with the attitude of mind and body required to practise contact improvisation.

Put simply, “tension masks sensation” (7). To dance contact improvisation one needs to attend to the inner sensations as one moves and when muscular tone increases then the ability to attend to these sensations diminishes. When a movement is oriented to a goal, such as getting up onto someone’s shoulders to “fly”, muscular effort is introduced in order to steer the movement towards the goal. What the beginner doesn’t realise is that in trying hard to achieve their goal, they are taking themselves in the opposite direction from which they ultimately wish to go.

To recap, using forms to teach contact improvisation is problematic since students tend to “try hard” to emulate what they see, not realizing that what they see is an expression of what skilled contact dancers are sensing.

### **A Concrete Example – The “Table” Position**

One concrete example of the shortcoming of teaching contact improvisation through forms is that of the “table”. The “table” position is simply one person standing on hands and knees so that their back is more or less horizontal to the floor. In this position, a partner can practise many things: how to balance on the “table” so their hands and feet can leave the floor, various ways to get up into that position and various ways to come back down. In my years of teaching this, I notice two distinct types of shortcomings.

The first type occurs in the act of teaching it. Nowadays, I don’t call the position the “table”, but rather simply “on all fours” or becoming a “four-legged human animal”. The problem I have with the word “table” is that it creates an image of something static and that one can balance on. Presented as a “table”, often the person making the position holds themselves still (locking up in the arms and legs, shoulders and hips, and consequently their whole selves) while the person attempting to make the seemingly simple balancing position above seems to

do so on their own, straining to lift themselves up into the balance and hold it through their own effort. They are doing it on the person underneath not with them.

The idea behind contact improvisation is that the two people sense themselves and each other in contact, in other words they have a dialogue. And that dialogue happens in relation to the environment in which it unfolds: the earth, the floor, the common ground they share; and the air, space, that which invites them to move through it. In terms of this exercise, the balance position of the person above is created through a dialogue with the person underneath, in space, on the earth, and in gravity. The balance is co-created by all these elements.

These days, I still teach this exercise since there is much to explore within it, but have changed my presentation of it considerably in order to try to stay true to the somatic nature of contact improvisation. I take time for everyone to play on all fours; to experience how subtle movements of the belly centre can shift the distribution of the weight through all four major points of contact with the floor (hands and knees); to play with lifting one of the four points away from the floor and see how the weight is redistributed. And to explore how directing their attention out into the space surrounding them allows them to gain strength while lessening muscular tone; the lesson of the unbendable arm – resilient strength through orientation in space.

I get everyone to play with balancing on the floor on their bellies (the Landau position), experimenting with different ways to orient oneself in it: pulling oneself up by shortening the back muscles, or beginning the movement by pushing the belly into the floor and lengthening the front surface; reaching out into space through the tips of the fingers and toes, head and tail; again finding support through spatial orientation. I get people to sing as they try the variations so they notice which allow the breath to be fuller and freer.

When transitioning to working in couples with one person on all fours, I ask the other to approach first by leaning into the one on the floor from the side so that the one on all fours clearly has to respond by moving. I ask the other to gradually transition to bringing the weight more from above. Slowly I encourage both people to play with finding how one can balance on the other through cooperation, not to trying to hold it but by moving through it, using directions in space to orient, enjoying the moment of effortless balance then seeing where it could go. I ask them to dance themselves through the exercise, to find the dance in the exercise. I use the metaphor that this exercise is a very thin slice of a dance; like a thin slice of cake, thin as it is, is still cake.

In practice, the balance point is a very delicate thing. It's finely balanced. And there are many more sensations that I can draw the students attention towards. But this description above gives a flavour of how I present this exercise. There are more complex patterns that can be taught of how to get into and get out of this balance position. Again I try to present them in a playful manner, trying to emphasise the sensations and fine-level adjustments that can be made.

However, no matter how much care I take, I invariably notice in beginners the second shortcoming of presenting such exercises in classes. Namely that in open dancing, students will often cut the flow of their movement, pull themselves away from their partners and reposition

themselves in this classic balance position that they recognise from this class exercise in order to be able to do the patterns of getting in and out of it that they learned in class.

On the one level, this seems logical. They are practising what they learned. But on another level it seems a shame since they seem to me to break their connection with their improvisational flow and their curiosity. They seem to steer themselves away from the novel and the unknown, from a mind of experiencing and exploring into one of doing and achieving, from improvising into exercising.

### What Am I trying To Teach?

In examining the example above, I made a lot of references to the possible pitfalls of teaching contact improvisation to beginners through the use of forms presented as exercises. I also pointed out that, however careful I am to emphasise the somatic aspects, in open improvisation I see students attempting to repeat the forms presented in these familiar exercises.

However, I think that this phenomena also occurs with more experienced dancers too. As students acquire more and more vocabulary, particularly of the “flying” variety, I notice that a repetition of known patterns occurs and as a result, albeit more subtle, a similar closing to the unknown and unfamiliar occurs. The dance looks less like improvisation and more the exercise of a known vocabulary. The dancers look as if they are caught in a endless repeating loop.

While this known vocabulary might be fun to dance, about ten years ago I noticed in myself (and heard similar echoes from my peers) that after a certain level of skill is achieved then frustration and boredom with the form can easily set in. I began to ask myself, why dance contact improvisation? What’s my interest now?

Two clear answers that I came up with were to meet others in the dance, and to improvise. I especially enjoy meeting someone for the first time on the dance floor and *then* having a conversation later if at all. I also enjoy the dances that to me felt truly improvised: where I felt there was a wide-ranging conversation occurring; where the movements were often unfamiliar; where it felt like this known vocabulary was set aside; and where I myself responding from a more reflex level.

The answers to these questions clearly mark out what I wanted to convey in my teaching of the form. I began to make up simpler exercises in which to focus mostly on the kinds of sensations that we need to attend to while dancing contact and creating structures in which to play so that the vocabulary of contact improvisation can reveal itself to the students in the act of exploring the terrain.

### Limited Parameter Scores

In 2003, I started to get interested in agreeing limits to the dance with a partner before a dance. For example, having a dance where only the legs and feet can be in contact. I found these dances interesting in that the limitations of the dance disrupted, or even eliminated altogether, known vocabulary. In exploring such limitations, I recognised some stages in the dances that would tend to recur: excitement at the novel situation and the possibilities presented; frustration at the limits; boredom; and then great excitement, if I and my partner had the

patience to stay with the exploration, as new vocabulary would emerge. Concomitant with this was a state of mind that I recognised as improvisational. By that I mean non-goal oriented, curious, relaxed, open and creative.

In my teaching of contact improvisation to both beginners and more experienced dancers I started to make use of such limited parameter scores. A favourite of mine is to restrict weight sharing to the horizontal plane: leaning and counterbalance only, no giving weight from above, no support from below.

With beginners it takes away the fear and awkwardness of weight-bearing, both giving or receiving, and associated issues of safety. It establishes a set of parameters within which they can experience moments of flow, follow their curiosity and enter into improvisational mind. And, perhaps most interestingly, recognised vocabulary spontaneously emerges.

With more experienced dancers, the restricted possibilities encourage them to interact with more subtlety (how much weight in the touch for example) and it shows them (often dramatically) how conditioned they are to move into certain patterns of giving weight, of moving through certain pathways up into lifts. It can also sometimes reveal novel situations in which they discover new pathways. In short, I believe it reconnects them with the improvisational nature of the form.

Last summer at the International Contact Festival Freiburg (8), during the pre-festival teachers' meeting I had the opportunity to lead a study lab and I chose to explore further with my peers the idea of these limited parameter scores which led me to clarify my thinking around them.

In planning to present the lab, I recognised that many common contact improvisation exercises fitted this description. For example: the *head-to-head* dance which is often used to introduce beginners to the form but in which I am still discovering new possibilities; *rolling point of contact* is another classic exercise where one attempts to maintain a continuous rolling point of contact with a partner without jumping or sliding it; or *light touch* where one tries to keep the weight in the shared point of contact to a minimum. There are many more.

There are also a few which I have made up as teaching aids for myself (like *horizontal weight sharing*), though doubtless I'm not the only one to have discovered them: *only the arms and shoulder girdle in contact*; *only the torsos in contact*; *only belly centres in contact*; and *flip-flop*, where you are not allowed to give or receive full weight nor rest in horizontal weight sharing (leaning).

I introduced the study lab by leading a "stand" and taking it into a *head-to-head* "warm-up" dance. I introduced the concept of these limited parameter scores, pointing out the *head-to-head* was one of them. We then explored the *horizontal weight sharing* score. In the second half of the lab, we worked in small groups experimenting with making up more of these kinds of restricted parameter scores and finally gathered together to share what we'd found.

What emerged from the lab practically was a long list of limited parameter scores to experiment with. Some of them I had thought of before but many I hadn't, even if they seemed obvious in retrospect. We opened a dialogue about their usefulness in teaching that has continued by email and when meeting others who were present in the lab. Being able to

enunciate my thinking around these limited parameter scores and enter into a dialogue with my peers about them has led me to shed new light on my teaching of contact both retrospectively and looking ahead.

Retrospectively, I now understand why I left many of the well-known formal contact improvisation exercises behind and invented simpler forms (both alone and with a partner) which were not readily transferable in dancing contact improvisation but are useful in becoming familiar with the kinds of sensations that we need to be able to track while dancing contact improvisation. Examples of themes that such exercises address include: tracking the sensation of weight and support flowing in opposite directions through the body; finding the centre of mass of the body; how extension into space can act as a support.

Looking ahead, I see I can make more explicit use of the juxtaposition of simple exercises in which to familiarise beginner students with sensations together with a range of limited parameter scores in which students can freely improvise their way to the emergent vocabulary.

In 2009, I began to teach a new series of workshops for dancers with three or more years of contact improvisation experience entitled *Improvising Contact Improvisation* in which I explicitly deal with how to improvise with the form. As a result of this I realised through the feedback of participants that not only do these limited parameter scores open up unexplored vocabulary and induce improvisational mind, but they also help to develop the patience, confidence and curiosity to stay with unusual themes that arise in open dancing.

This is interesting feedback for me since this ability is something that I recognise as wanting to encourage in students in my contemporary composition classes. Obvious with hindsight, I'd never really connected this with the practice of contact improvisation in jams. It's something that I recognize that I do, but had never thought of teaching explicitly before. For me it makes a nice connection back to the origins of contact improvisation as a performance score.

## Notes

1. Paxton, S. "Drafting Interior Techniques". *Contact Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (Winter– Spring 1993): 61-66
2. *Contact Quarterly*, "Contact Improvisation Contacts List", *Contact Quarterly* web site <https://community.contactquarterly.com/contacts/public> accessed February 2009
3. Smith, N. S. "A Question of Copyright – Some History". CQ 2008; p177.
4. Koteen, D. & Smith N. S. 2008; p38
5. What in contact is often referred to as "flying" is actually the act of one person balancing on another. This balancing act is often not static, but rather both people are in motion. The term "flying" arises I think because the subjective feeling is "as if" one were flying.
6. Nancy Stark Smith: "Replace ambition with curiosity." Koteen, D. & Smith N. S. 2008; p40
7. Nancy Stark Smith: "Tension masks sensation." Koteen, D. & Smith N. S. 2008; p51
8. Europe's largest contact improvisation festival – see International Contact Festival Freiburg, <http://www.contactfestival.de>, accessed February 2009

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