

Oral communication at the *Workshop "Contemporary Dance Techniques/Improvisation for teachers"*, Lugar Presente - Artes Performativas Viseu, as part of the Lugar Futuro Festival - International Youth Dance Festival 2026 - 6th edition, Viseu, March 28, 2026, 2 pm.



Pedagogical function and application of tools and methodological strategies of improvisation in Contemporary Dance training (education)

Vítor Garcia
Polytechnic Institute of Lisbon (IPL)
Escola Superior de Dança (ESD)

Abstract

To examine the pedagogical role of improvisation in Contemporary Dance training (education), highlighting the concept of deliberate movement and its impact on the technical, creative, and reflective development of the performer-creator.

A theoretical-practical analysis of pedagogical approaches that integrate 'tasks', guided improvisation (directed), *Contact Improvisation*, and *Live Composition* tools, articulating contributions from key authors with contemporary teaching and creative practices. Research and personalization in contemporary dance – deliberate movement: from 'technique' to exploration; from execution to composition; from structuring to personalization.

Improvisation as a promoter of kinesthetic awareness, real-time decision-making, relational listening, and creative autonomy. Evidence of its role as a generator of original choreographic material and as a mediator between formative and creative processes, enhancing collaboration, reflection, and authorship.

Improvisation constitutes a structuring axis of Contemporary Dance pedagogy, functioning simultaneously as technique, methodology, and real-time compositional technology. Its systematic integration contributes to the development of more conscious, versatile performers prepared for current artistic challenges.

Keywords: improvisation, deliberate movement, contemporary dance pedagogy, methodological strategies.

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Resumo

Examinar a função pedagógica da improvisação na formação em Dança Contemporânea, destacando o conceito de movimento deliberado e o seu impacto no desenvolvimento técnico, criativo e reflexivo do intérprete-criador.

Análise teórico-prática de abordagens pedagógicas que integram *tasks*, improvisação guiada (dirigida), *Contact Improvisation* e ferramentas de *Live Composition*. Pela articulação dos contributos de autores de referência com práticas de ensino e criação contemporâneas. Pesquisa e personalização na dança contemporânea – movimento deliberado: da ‘técnica’ à exploração; da execução à composição; da estruturação à personalização.

A improvisação como promotora de consciência cinestésica, tomada de decisão em tempo real, escuta relacional e autonomia criativa. Evidência como geradora de material coreográfico original e como mediadora entre processos formativos e criativos, potenciando colaboração, reflexão e autoria.

A improvisação constitui um eixo estruturante da pedagogia da Dança Contemporânea, funcionando simultaneamente como técnica, metodologia e tecnologia de composição em tempo real. A sua integração sistemática contribui para formar intérpretes mais conscientes, versáteis e preparados para os desafios artísticos atuais.

Palavras-chave: improvisação, movimento deliberado, pedagogia da dança contemporânea, estratégias metodológicas.

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COMMUNICATION

Improvisation occupies a central place in contemporary dance pedagogy, not only as a performative technique but as an epistemological device that articulates knowledge, creation, and subjectivity (technology – applied knowledge – according to William Forsythe, 2023, 2012).

Some contemporary dance techniques not only use improvisational tools occasionally but are structurally organized to develop their content and objectives within fully improvisational contexts. Integrating improvisation strategies into training promotes an environment that values autonomy, sensitive listening, bodily awareness, and the emergence of original choreographic material. Its methodological value becomes indispensable both for training and for creative processes.

As stated by Cynthia Novak, improvisation opens space for the performer to become an active agent in the construction of movement (Novack, 1990), by shifting the focus from reproduction to creation.

The concept of deliberate movement, according to Vitor Garcia, refers to a mode of bodily action characterized by a high degree of kinesthetic awareness, explicit intention, and informed decision-making. It is movement that does not arise from technical automatism but from a continuous process of directing, planning, and determining, supported by the ‘versatile body’ (Louppe, 2012) and the ‘available body’ (Fazenda, 2012). This allows the performer to integrate multiple techniques, reorganize in real time, and respond creatively to performative demands. Thus, deliberate movement constitutes a practice in which the performer’s commitment becomes central, allowing each gesture to be simultaneously conscious, intentional, and adaptable (Garcia, 2014).

Contemporaneity requires a dancer, an interpreter, who knows what they do and why they do it, echoing Feldenkrais’s statement: “it’s only when you know what you’re doing that you can really do what you want.” (Feldenkrais, 1984, quoted in Sieben, 2014, p. 68). Consequently, deliberate movement reveals itself as conscious, informed, and intentional movement, especially when it occurs in contexts of ephemeral creation — improvisation.

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1. Improvisation as a Pedagogical Tool

Improvisation, as a pedagogical practice, allows students to develop fundamental skills for Contemporary Dance:

- **Body awareness and proprioception** (awareness)

According to Hubert Godard, the body is a territory of perception in constant reorganization (Godard, 1995). Improvisation stimulates this reorganization by proposing situations of sensory-motor exploration.

- **Real-time decision-making** (availability)

Steve Paxton, creator of Contact Improvisation, emphasizes that improvising implies being available to the unknown (Paxton, 1975, 2015), to “(...) something that can’t keep a name” (Paxton, 2001, p. 421). This availability is an essential cognitive and artistic skill.

Listening and relationality (live composition)

For Forsythe, improvising is composing in real time — *Live Composition* (Forsythe, 2012). Instant composition requires listening — to the body, the space, and the other — and develops relational capacities crucial for collective and collaborative work.

- **Creative autonomy** (performer-creator)

Improvisation shifts the student from a passive role to an authorial and active one, promoting aesthetic and reflective responsibility.

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2. Methodological Strategies of Improvisation in Dance Training

The pedagogical application of improvisation can take on various methodological forms, including:

2.1. Tasks and open structures (spatial and directional themes — Laban/LMA) — Structured Improvisation

Influenced by the Judson Dance Theater and artists such as Trisha Brown, tasks allow parameters to be defined that guide exploration without determining the outcome. This approach stimulates creativity within a structured framework.

2.2. Improvisation guided by images, bodily states, and emotional states — Guided Improvisation and Narrative Improvisation

Drawing on authors such as Anna Halprin, Lisa Nelson, or Ohad Naharin (Katan, 2016), the use of imagery, sensory qualities, or emotional states functions as a trigger for the emergence of non-habitual movement. It may also promote the research and establishment of dramaturgical narratives conducive to choreographic production. Focus/intention on movement quality and phrasing — interpretation.

2.3. Contact Improvisation — Partner/Duet Improvisation

Beyond technique, Contact Improvisation is a pedagogy of relationship, where weight, touch, and shared center (core) become learning tools. Paxton describes Contact Improvisation as a research on gravity, touch, and reflexes, where the body learns through relation. It develops trust, adaptability, kinesthetic awareness, communicability, and sensitivity.

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2.4. Tools for instant composition (real-time) — Deliberate Movement

Forsythe proposes systems such as *Improvisation Technologies*, which function as 'cognitive maps' for generating and manipulating choreographic material, and which the body can 'draw' in space, creating geometries that structure improvisation. These tools articulate improvisation and composition, bringing the training process closer to the professional creative process — *Live Composition* (2003). They make movement production more conscious, deliberate, and consolidated through a process of instantaneous and creative decision-making.

3. Relationship Between the Training Process and the Creative/Choreographic Process

The methodological contribution of improvisation acts as a bridge between training and creation:

- **Generates original choreographic material**

Improvisation is often used as an initial stage of creation, allowing the choreographer to collect material emerging from the performer's body. As Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker states, improvisation is a laboratory where movement reveals itself before being organized, and structure is what allows freedom (De Keersmaeker, 2014).

- **Develops performer-creators**

Contemporary Dance today requires performers capable of contributing creatively. Improvisation trains performers who think, decide, and compose.

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- **Promotes collaborative processes**

By fostering the development of collaborative skills, improvisation facilitates horizontal practices in which knowledge circulates among teacher, choreographer, and performers, bringing the pedagogical environment closer to the creative environment.

- **Integrates reflection and practice**

Improvisation stimulates metacognition: the student observes themselves, analyzes their choices, and understands their creative process. This strengthens autonomy and critical capacity. Smith-Autard (2002) argues that reflection is an essential part of the teaching-learning cycle in dance, allowing experience and knowledge to be integrated.

4. Final Considerations

Improvisation, as a methodological and creative strategy, constitutes a structuring axis of Contemporary Dance training, while also functioning as a technology of Live Composition. Its use may range from occasional inclusion within a class structure to the complete organization of a Contemporary Dance class, providing exploration and the development required by the discipline.

By articulating bodily exploration, decision-making, instant composition, and critical reflection, it contributes to the formation of performers who are more conscious, creative, collaborative, and prepared for the challenges of contemporary artistic practice. Its pedagogical function transcends technique: it is a way of thinking, creating, and being in the world.

Functioning simultaneously as technique, methodology, and real-time compositional technology, its systematic integration contributes solidly to the formation of performers who are more conscious, versatile, available, and prepared for current artistic challenges.

After all, Improvisation — like Contemporary Dance itself, and according to various authors — can be many things, but it is not just anything. **‘It can be a lot of things but it's not just anything!’**

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