

Preparing for the unknown: Dance Improvisation in the Liberal Arts

This article, co-authored by Chris Aiken and Angie Hauser, has been accepted for inclusion by the editors of the Journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critique en improvisation* for a special upcoming issue devoted to improvisation and the liberal art. It is currently “in review”.



AMHERST COLLEGE

Department of Music

Jason Robinson, Assistant Professor of Music

September 2, 2016

To: Professor Chris Aiken
Professor Angie Hauser
Department of Dance
Smith College

Dear Professor Aiken and Professor Hauser,

Thank you for your exceptional submission ("Preparing for the Unknown: Dance Improvisation in the Liberal Arts") to the special issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* on "Improvisation and the Liberal Arts" that I am guest co-editing with Sandra Mathern-Smith and Mark Lomanno. While the special issue has been approved by the managing editors of the journal, we are still reviewing all of the submissions, after which time they will be sent out for blind peer review.

Despite these upcoming review processes, I'm very impressed by your submission and I have full confidence that it will be included in the special issue. Your incisive and important contributions to improvisation and dance within the context of the liberal arts that are presented in your submission will most certainly have a strong impact in the burgeoning field of improvisation studies.

If you need further support or information please don't hesitate to ask.

Sincerely,

Jason Robinson
Assistant Professor, Department of Music
Affiliated faculty: Black Studies, Film and Media Studies
Amherst College

Chair, Five Colleges Ethnomusicology Committee

Guest Co-Editor, "Improvisation and the Liberal Arts," *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*

Preparing for the Unknown: Dance Improvisation in the Liberal Arts

CHRIS AIKEN and ANGIE HAUSER

Department of Dance, Smith College, Northampton, MA 01063, USA

E-mail: ahauser@smith.edu, caiken@smith.edu

In this article we situate the teaching of dance improvisation within the liberal arts learning environment and identify the opportunities it provides for students to build essential capacities of resilience, resourcefulness, creativity, curiosity, self-awareness, and collaboration. We arrive at the teaching of improvisation from a discipline specific place - as dancers and dance makers, yet we believe the intentional practice and research of improvisational forms enriches the study of any and all disciplines found in the liberal arts. Our approach is founded on the idea that improvisational skill is an inherent part of functioning in the world. Our thinking and research takes form in two distinct contexts: the professional contemporary concert dance field, and in higher education, particularly the liberal arts and women's education institution of Smith College.

Context

In the professional realm we are dance artists who ground our performance work and research in the practice and principles of improvisation. We co-teach workshops for professional dance artists and dance companies that focus on improvisation and performance. Our research, teaching and art making are inseparable. We use the classroom as a laboratory for our art-making and vice versa.

We are also on the faculty of Smith College in the Department of Dance. Smith College is a private residential liberal arts college in Northampton, MA with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 2500 students and a full time equivalent instructional faculty of approximately 280. Founded in 1871, the College has the stated mission to “educate women of promise for lives of distinction.” Smith College is dedicated to providing women with educational choice, exposure to new fields, and a wide range of study opportunities including extensive curricular and co-curricular work in STEM, Humanities, Social Sciences and the Arts. Smith's department of dance is a distinct department with an undergraduate major and minor and MFA graduate program. The Department of Dance serves hundreds of students each year most who do not major in dance but choose to participate in the curriculum as a part of their liberal arts experience.

At Smith, we teach a variety of courses in which we use our research in improvisation as direct content

- Dance Composition (Hauser)
- Choreography and Creative Process (Hauser)
- Choreography and Design (Aiken)
- Contemporary Dance Technique: Improvisation (Aiken)
- Contemporary Dance Technique: Contact Improvisation (Aiken)
- Contemporary Dance Technique (Hauser)
- Repertory: Improvisation Ensemble (Aiken/Hauser)
- Merce Cunningham Technique and Context (Hauser)

At this moment, Smith College and other like institutions are looking for opportunities to use liberal arts campuses as classrooms for problem-based teaching and to offer experiential and

applied opportunities for students. These growing interests are not to replace critical thinking and analysis, but rather to partner with these important values of liberal arts learning. In this article we reflect on our body of research developed while teaching in the professional dance realm, and discuss its impact in our liberal arts classrooms.

Working Definitions: Performance Improvisation, Physical Intelligence, Metacognition

In this article we are speaking primarily about improvising as a performance practice of composing dances in real-time in solo, duet, trio or ensemble forms. This is different than improvising to generate material for compositions that will ultimately be “set” or as a technique for developing physical skills. While each of these two agendas and practices are important and a part of our work, here we are looking specifically to performance improvisation for the cognitive and physical challenges and learning potential it presents.

In our dance making classes we ask students to choreograph in real-time -- to improvise. This happens every class in a variety of ways and is always considered performing. Real-time choreography, as with set choreography, includes composing movement, arranging the space through traveling and locating, composing dynamics of time and integrating content. All of this is done in relationship to what is happening at any given moment, therefore the students must also hone their attention and perceptions to what is emerging. In real-time choreography, performance occurs in traditional ways such as a dancer improvising while a seated audience group is watching. It also occurs in other less traditional ways including improvising while only one other classmate is watching, or even while no one is formally audience-ing yet the improviser is aware of being witnessed by others in the ensemble. Performance can be many things and we encourage students to interrogate the notion by defining and redefining it throughout their dance making practice. A practical definition we share with our students is “performance is making choices as if you were being witnessed.” This leaves room for wide interpretations but gives students something to hold onto at the same time.

Our teaching of movement and physical intelligence has developed from our years of experience. It is also informed theoretically by the work of Nikolai Bernstein, a neurophysiologist whose research is seminal in the field of motor control and the science of action. In his book *On Dexterity and Its Development*, Bernstein presents a clear model for understanding the relationship between automated skills and intentional behavior in dynamically evolving environments. An automated skill is a learned behavior that can function without conscious control. Bernstein believed that our automated skills are stored in the brain and form a kind of “movement library.” It is these automatisms that allow us to shift our attention to solving complex movement problems and engage in purposeful behavior. Imagine if every time we rode a bicycle we had to focus on the details of pedaling, balancing and steering.

Bernstein discovered through sophisticated experiments that when we are learning skills we are not honing ready-made movements polished to perfection through repetitive drilling so that they can be made available for activation when the appropriate stimulus arrives. Through solving problems in a variety of ways and under a range of conditions we commit to memory a repertoire of solutions gleaned from practicing under dynamic conditions. To become automatic a skill must be explored deeply enough so that the essential structure, form and adaptations can be stored in the brain. The adaptations are the sensory corrections that allow a movement skill to adapt to variances that occur.

Rather than teaching our students “moves” we teach principles which help them frame and solve problems through movement. For example, rather than teach a particular turn with

predetermined pathway, shape and coordination we are more likely to teach the principles of pivoting, centrifugal force, and organization of the spine. Then we put it to the student to use these principles to improvise solutions to the problem of turning.

Ultimately the goal of automating skills is to free us to engage in higher-level cognitive activities. For a dance improviser we want to be able to focus on our aesthetic goals and intentions, our desires to collaborate and be in touch with the audience. In her article *Hearing Seeing and Perceptual Agency* ethnomusicologist, Ingrid Monson describes how a skilled musician has the ability to play her part while listening to and coordinating with different players within the whole ensemble. She calls this perceptual agency [1]. It is because our skills have become automate that we are capable of this kind of activity.

One additional but important aspect of Bernstein's research that we find useful concerns his concept of "memory of the future" which refers to the ways in which people utilize their experience, their memories, to make sense of what is happening in the present and to imagine what is about to, or could happen in the near future. This ability increases with experience and strategic learning. The ability to recognize, coordinate or deviate from emergent forms depends on our ability to extrapolate from what *is* happening *what is likely to happen*, to imagine the effects of one's choices and to make an intelligent choice. This is fundamental for all improvisers.

We use the concept of metacognition in our dance improvisation pedagogy as a model for helping students understand a multi-layered approach to thinking, perceiving and problem solving. Metacognition, originally conceived in 1979 by psychologist John H. Flavell as "thinking about thinking", refers to the capacity to use knowledge about oneself and cognition to strategize before an experience and to process after and experience [2]. We view, as do ecological psychologists, perception as an essential component of cognition and a key component of learning [3].

We begin with the idea that each dancer must combine her knowledge of herself with her understanding of learning and action. She must connect this with her knowledge about the field of dance, composition and performance. The metacognitive aspect refers to learning how to prepare to improvise, how to monitor oneself during improvising (when the speed of action allows) and how to process and utilize experience through group feedback.

Some examples of our metacognitive methods include teaching students how to develop personal strategies for directing movements (subscores), perceptual tuning techniques to guide awareness (this can be to facilitate a particular aesthetic quality or to compensate for identified weaknesses), and strategies for coping with the intensity of performing (i.e. reframing the audience within the ecological contexts of performance rather than as judges or people to please).

An Eco-Poetic Approach

Our approach is eco-poetic, emphasizing both the ecological realities and the poetic imagination of the individual. The performing arts place a premium on the ability to attune to one's surroundings, one's body and one's instrument. The ability to shape and adapt to the intrinsic and extrinsic variables of both body and environment, demand perceptual acuity, adaptive strategies and anticipatory skill. Each performer in an improvisational ensemble is both an agent of change and an adaptive responder and supporter of the happenings around them.

In her book, the *Language of Landscape*, Anne Whiston Spirn talks about the grammar and poetics of landscape. She suggests that part of her job as a designer is to read the landscape from a multitude of perspectives and at different levels of scale [4]. In an analogous way, we believe that dance improvisers must learn to read their performance environments, the place, the light, the floor, the dancers, the audience, the sound environment, including the social, political, and cultural contexts that surround them. In addition each artistic discipline comes with its own codes, values and power dynamics [cite Bourdieu] that must be navigated by its participants. For our dancers these are the implicit and explicit values that shape the field of postmodern dance. Ultimately, the point is not to try to be aware of everything simultaneously, but for the dancer to remember they are composing within ecologies and to take time the time to develop a sense of literacy in reading their surroundings.

We agree with Spirn our the belief that ecological awareness and poetic imagination are complementary. We believe it is important to deconstruct the idea of the artist as a fountain of creativity or as a muse for inspiration. In our teaching we simultaneously sensitize students to their environment while developing their poetic imagination. We experiment with the shrinking and dilation of scale, from the macro to the micro, with the idea that each level offers information that is both inspiring and important for understanding and coordinating with what is happening. At the micro level we tune dancers to the level of visual, haptic and auditory details. The dancer, in these moments, is freed from the need to make sense of the whole--the big picture--and is allowed to dive into the minutia of her phenomenal world. She becomes a collector and curator of details, using them as inspiration to build a composition. At this level the dancer focuses on her own experience, her movements, thoughts, sensations, feelings and imaginations. Practice in this realm allows the student to develop her own relationship to movement and its syntax.

Practicing at the micro-level is important, but it is only the beginning. To improvise requires the ability to dilate one's awareness to include one's collaborators, the audience and the surroundings. A dancer who stays for too long at the micro level can appear self-absorbed and disconnected from what is happening. Broadening one's field of attention allows for coordinated action and a co-evolved sense of purpose and meaning.

Engaging at the relational level include the possibilities for coordinating and counterpointing movement between people -- which includes unison, harmony, contrast or simply conscious co-existence. It also includes less formal relationships where movement generation is sourced from a perceived quality or tone of another dancer. We often call attention to relationship by improvising with a focus on the perceived space/time between. This includes designing the negative space between bodies. It also includes on a temporal, performance level durational relationships--the space between gestures, the possibilities for interlocking gestures in time, counterpointing and composing the density of the collaborative gestures. This is the perceptual agency that Monson speaks about-- the ability to consciously shift and tune awareness to different levels of time and space, to compose who and what we relate.

Our conception of poetics starts with students considering the relationship between gestures which forms the syntax and kinetic melody of their dancing. We draw students attention to the relationship between the formal aspects of dancing--such as shape, patterning, spatial relationships, and--as well as the feelings and reverie that inspire and inform the performers and the audience. We try to have as broad a definition of poetics as possible so that we are not imposing an aesthetic on our students. We encourage them to identify and cultivate a sense of what inspires them and when moments occur in the performing when the dance escapes the

formal aspects of bodies moving in space and becomes a vehicle for the imagination and visceral engagement.

Perceptual Acuity and Learning

An essential component of our teaching is guiding students towards the development of perceptual acuities primarily through guided practice. The idea, drawn from Eleanor Gibson, is that over time, as we develop, we tune to finer and finer differentiations and relationships that exist in our world. We notice more when we are given the opportunity to learn from practice. We create opportunities for our students to learn from perceiving and action in dynamically changing environments. Perceiving to learn, according to Gibson, is fundamental and is facilitated through practice and experimentation (Pick, 1992). She felt that this mode of learning was a critical companion to teaching students how to perceive. In the latter, the teacher is often shaping and curating perception, through the use of concepts, instructions, and direction. Both methods are valuable and a key part of our work. But ultimately we must create opportunities for our students to practice directing their own attention within the worlds they can perceive. Our role is to often to initiate subtle shifts in student's points of view and then to create situations that allow them to learn from their own experiences of making, collaborating and adapting.

One of the first steps towards perceptual acuity for the dancer is to refine her proprioception, the sense of her body in space and haptic perception, her sense of touch. Many dancers are trained by looking at the teacher and at themselves in the mirror. In this mode, the primary source of perceptual information and feedback is through vision. In contrast to this way of learning, we give students time to explore moving where the primary focus is on proprioception — the tone of her body, the form of her body in space, the feel of movement, the feel of what is touching her. Over time the student develops the capacity to feel her body, as a whole, and including the background tone of her body and its changes in response to her intention. As she mobilizes to move, the physical state of her body changes—it becomes more toned. As she comes to a resting place her body tone relaxes. Gradually she begins to notice the quality of her movements and discovers a more nuanced possibilities.

The skilled capacity to perceive through the sense of touch is a focal point of our teaching. This begins sensing the surfaces of the body touching the floor. Perceptual deficits at this level limit our sense of support, balance and ability to move. Through exploring the possibilities for pushing against the floor and yielding into it the dancer begins to find the relationship between support and mobility. Through her haptic perception she begins to discover ways of resisting gravity and falling into it. Next we work with the sensation of one body touching another. We guide students specifically through the dynamics of light touch (where there is no demand for support), to lightly leaning in towards a shared center, to extending weight fully towards the support of another person. Once students are introduced to these principles we begin to increase the capacity to move through space touching continuously or moving in and out of contact. Over time, just as the landscape designer reads the landscape, the dancer begins to read the bodies of her partners through her sense of touch. She detects information about movement, support, readiness, fear, calmness and overall sensitivity to each other.

When beginning students have developed their sense of touch we re-include vision and hearing as informational sources to focus upon. This extends the student's awareness beyond the her body and the people she is partnering with to include the space around her and the sonic landscape. In terms of vision we focus attention on the ability to see the dynamic relationships

between bodies and space. In design this is typically referred to as “negative space”. On a compositional level, the capacity to perceive the space between, around and behind things is essential. This is a visual skill that can be developed with practice.

Many dancers work with soundscapes that consist of live music, recorded music, ambient sound found sounds as well as sounds produced by the ensemble. In our training we emphasize listening to the spatial and temporal dynamics of sound. We find that few students can, without training, hear the spatial, temporal and sonic weave. We emphasize the ability to listen specifically to how the parts of the sonic landscape fit together, and how to find opportunities to be in relationship to the parts.

On a more intermodal sense level the ability to pay attention to the space between things that exist in the moment and are unfolding in real time. This goes beyond perceiving negative space to include the relationships between movement and stillness, sound and silence, the duration of a moment or a gesture and its relationship to what comes next or is happening simultaneously. In some cultures a greater emphasis is placed on the space between gestures than on the gestures themselves [6].

On a meta-level we teach students to perceive what is missing or what is not happening. This depends on their ability to track what has happened and to recognize the patterning of a performance. Who has been dominant? Who has been subordinate? Where has the dance taken place on stage? What has the pacing been? Perceiving in this way allows the student to recognize the potential for innovation, contrast or restraint. Sometimes what is perceived is the need join what is happening to decrease the complexity.

The Shape of Attention

As we have introduced, dance improvisation is a metacognitive practice which by nature demands (and therefore builds) agility of thinking, perceiving and action. In our work and teaching we speak to this agility through the notion of “the shape of attention [7].” We began using this framework while teaching workshops for professional dancers and dance makers. We found in this context the notion of ‘attention’ pointed to the complexity of metacognitive rich experiences while remaining open for experienced dance artists to bring their point of view and knowledge.

We bring this back to our studio classrooms in the liberal arts setting where we further the research by working with beginning improvisers. We guide students through improvisation experiences and teach them how to manage, and ‘survive’, the physical, cognitive, and perceptual complexities. Within a few sessions of practicing composing in real-time with a ensemble, students report an experience of ‘juggling’ multiple layers of attention. Over the arc of the course we work to bring them to a place of not only successful juggling but also a greater ability to consciously direct their attention while dancing. Easy enough in theory but in reality it is a messy and disorienting process that demands perseverance and tolerance for failure from both student and teacher.

At the start of the semester we bring students’ awareness to some of the core layers at play during ensemble improvisation. These include

- awareness of space: location in relation to others and to the room, topographical density of action, dynamics of ‘local space’ (the space of the individual kinesphere)
- awareness of time: duration, speed, phrasing, pacing macro composition

- awareness of relationship: history of action, togetherness and apartness, group configurations [eco-poetics]

There is not the expectations that the students will be able to attend to all of these complex awarenesses all the time, yet we bring attention to the complexity from the beginning to allow students to begin to adjust to the cognitive load. Building the perceptual skill to recognize what is important to attend to is key. It is rare that an improviser would attempt to keep all the layers of awareness at equal levels of importance all the time. This is because it is impossible, but more important it is because this way of paying attention makes for a diluted performance where no aspect is ever taken on with boldness because all are being held with an equal part of the performer's attention.

The cognitive processing load when composing in real-time is high. It is easy to become exhausted mentally, to become distracted, to have 'gaps' in attention. At this early point in the practice of the work students report the experience of large moments of "not knowing what is going on" or "feeling lost." These attentional gaps are one of the most consistent challenges for students and professional performers alike. Attentional endurance, or the ability to sustain attention in situations that have a high metacognitive demand, is a vital part of improvising. Reducing gaps of awareness is an explicit aim in our classes and it challenges students to build mental stamina. Early in the semester, new students are likely to drop in and out of focused attention throughout a 20 minute improvisation, showing obvious times when they are 'lost' in the flux of what is happening and others times when they are legibly aware. This flowing in and out of focus is a part of improvising at any experience level. Improvisers must build mental endurance as part of the training. With students new to improvising it is important to draw the students awareness to this, so that she can begin to recognize for herself when she is engaging her attention actively and when she is unaware. We work with students on noticing the gaps and experimenting with approaches to recalibrating attention. Here are few examples of how this work manifests in class

- Verbal coaching and direction. We regularly offer specific, real-time feedback to the students as they are dancing. At first this practice can feel overwhelming, yet another layer of information to pay attention to, but we find with time it is an incredibly effective way to wake up the student's awareness.
- Structured discussions. After improvisational sets we create discussions groups in which the students can identify the different perspectives of 'what happened' during the dancing, and identify and discuss their gaps.
- Working with clock time. It is easy to lose track of time when improvising -- a minute can feel like twenty, yet learning to accurately 'feel' particular lengths of time insists that students acknowledge their gaps in awareness. We give the students exercises that allows them to practice coordinating their attention with a specific amount of digital time: a one minute solo, a 5-minute trio, a 30-second duet. With practice students internalize the feel of these units of time and build skill at sensing shared duration.

How do you prepare for the unknown?

We are often asked by audience members, "how do you prepare improvise in performance?". This is a challenging and important question to answer. On one level we could say that the preparation for improvising is living and engaging consciously with the world. The layer of performance adds for us, and our students, the challenge that comes with inviting others to witness our efforts to create a shared aesthetic experience.

Agility, adaptability, resilience, patience, creativity, resourcefulness, equanimity, generosity, playfulness, and compassion seem essential and are threaded in overt and subconscious ways throughout our work. We have learned that performing tests the dancer's technical, performance and composition skills. The turbulence and complexity of these situations reveal whether skills have been refined and integrated enough to meet the physical and creative demands of the moment. We alternately increase and decrease the complexities involved in our improvisation scores through the use of more or less constraints. For example, we might spend time improvising where the dancers only focus on her perception and composition of duration. Alternately, we might ask her to focus on the spatial design of the space.

Setting the tone immediately prior to dancing is important. We teach students regularly how to cultivate the ability to be both alert and calm. We do this by drawing attention to the sensation of gravity, weight, and the earth beneath their feet. This draws the student to concrete sensations which can absorb her attention enough to quell her fears or nervous energy. This re-setting of the tone can be done during the performance if the dancer feels over loaded with information.

Part of the preparation for performance improvisation is readying yourself to be seen. We suggest that rather than focusing on showing what she can do, the student frame her performance as a sharing of artistic research. The audience is an essential part of that research and the students must learn strategies of inclusion. We suggest that the audience is not there to judge but is are active participants in the research.

Another way we prepare dancers to improvise is through the use of scores and subscores. Scores are simply constraints that dancers place upon themselves when they are dancing. They can be physical (such as limiting what part of their body they are initiating movement from), perceptual (such as focusing on negative space or the sensation of weight) or aesthetic (such as composing with the idea of conflict or the formal constraints of unison movement). The difference between a score and a subscore is that a subscore is created by the individual and is private whereas a score is shared by the ensemble. We encourage dancers to have a long-term practice of developing subscores. These sometimes become long-term practice threads that the dancer can access in the moment when the space for them arises. An example might be that an ensemble dancer finds themselves in a situation where a solo opportunity presents itself. In that moment they can activate their research through the use of a subscore. Some examples of this could include: focusing on the kinetic melody of their movement, or tuning to the space between their gestures, or focusing on the integrated use of their spine. The point of having subscores is to prepare oneself to be ready with material should the moment arise when one is called upon to be the generative center of the performance.

What do students learn when there is nowhere to hide?

In our teaching in higher education we see students hindered by lack of confidence across their academic and social endeavors. Though they may have the skills and knowledge to succeed they are not always able to capitalize because of a lack of awareness and trust in their own preparedness. This shows up across disciplines in curricular and co-curricular activities. The work of performing improvisation demands the courage to do it. Our classes give students the opportunity to engage directly with courage -- having it, losing it, finding it, inventing it. We are interested in cultivating confidence through our improvisation practice and translating that confidence into bold choice-making and embodied creativity. Improvisational endeavors deliver a lived experience of making choices and surviving the outcomes. We often use the word "surviving" to point at the intensity of inner-awareness and experience that is going on when a

student is improvising. In the words of Jonathan Burrows “it is just a stupid dance” [8] but in the real-time moment of performance it can feel incredibly high-stakes. This creates a place for the student to experience the real psycho-emotional challenges of being seen while being asked to synthesize complex information.

We can make the analogy to an oral defense of a thesis. This ‘rite of passage’ in the academy is the measure of a certain level of ‘mastery’ in student’s area of study. A successful oral defense includes agility of thinking, precision of knowledge and articulation, and the development a clear point of view. A student who can express her knowledge and skills in a prepared paper or project but fumbles through an oral is considered not to have mastered the material. So what is happening in the oral defense that is not happening in the prepared paper or project? Our answer: the synthesis of real-time composition of ideas, a clear point of view, and responsiveness to the environment.

We want students to be able to merge with the ideas of others, to coordinate and support, but we also want them to be able to stand on their own; to confidently put forth something. Synthesis happens in the coming together at the moment of presentation. This calls on a holistic firing of skills including interpersonal and personal skills like confidence and agility of communication.

In dance improvisation we practice boldness and confidence on a continuum of low to high stake activities. A low stake activity might be improvising in a group in which everyone has eyes closed. This liberates the dancer from the chatter in her head about what others are seeing in her dancing. A high-stake activity might be improvising in an ensemble on a traditional proscenium stage with theatrical lights and a paying audience. Neither of these situations is more valuable, it is the range that we find yields quality learning and practice. In all these activities, we do not focus on the student practicing the thing she is preparing (the dance), rather we she is practicing the moment of synthesis – the place where there is nowhere to hide. The student must test her preparation at that moment. No one can stop time and get the preparation that is lacking, therefore one must work with what is available. Everyone can see where the person is in that moment of presentation. This can be terrifying, revealing, and intense but if done in a conscious environment the students are able to practice real moments of perseverance, failure, success, boldness, regret, fear, pride and accomplishment.

Conclusion

The teaching of resilience is a concept that is gaining traction in higher education, recently identified at Smith College as an “essential capacity” students should have on completion of their undergraduate experience. Resilience suggests the ability to adapt to adversity and challenge. It suggests the ability to inhibit choices that are non-productive or self-destructive. In our teaching of improvisation we teach students how to tolerate failure, discomfort and uncertainty by both creating a variety of high and low stake settings for them to practice. In these situations we learn to embrace being witnessed by others, being seen solving problems, which include failure and accomplishment. It is our belief that students are better equipped to handle the real life stress and failure if they see themselves engaged in a long-term growth process. We emphasize inhibit over-emphasizing individual actions and to value the transformations that occur over time. We often quote choreographer and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer’s injunction that “all improvisers must develop a relationship to regret”. It is not about if you fail, but when you fail. Failure is explicitly required in our class. This is illustrated by one of our evaluation methodologies which measures student’s work on a scale of “Failure” to “Not Failure” with the “Failure” end of the continuum being the desirable goal. This explicit

expectation that at times the student will not reach the mark she is aiming for yet is expected to make the attempt with absolutely everything she is prepared with at that moment is the foundation of our teaching philosophy and practice.

The skills students learn in dance improvisation are applicable to any situation in which a student is challenged to be agile in her thinking, collaborate with others and to be attuned to emerging situations. The ability to strategize, regulate and process one's thoughts, feelings and actions are the hallmarks of metacognition and are applicable to all liberal arts disciplines. Although students often begin our classes feeling overwhelmed with the amount of things they must keep track of and the problems they must solve, over time they learn how to become more adept and efficient at processing what is happening and develop strategies to be successful. These skills build self-confidence because the student knows that she can stand on her own two feet, put forth her ideas, and collaborate with others. Her experiences with improvisation teach her that failure is part of the process. Success is defined by one's depth of inquiry, one's strength of purpose and one's generosity towards others.

References

1. Monson, Ingrid. "Hearing, Seeing, and Perceptual Agency." *Critical Inquiry* 2008: S36.
2. Livingston, Jennifer A. "Metacognition: An Overview." 2003.
3. Gibson, James J. *The Ecological Approach To Visual Perception*. n.p.: Boston : Houghton Mifflin, c1979., 1979.
4. Spirn, Anne Whiston. *The Language Of Landscape*. n.p.: New Haven [Conn.] : Yale University Press, c1998., 1998.
5. Pick, Herbert L. "Eleanor J. Gibson: Learning To Perceive And Perceiving To Learn." *Developmental Psychology* 28.5 (1992): 787-794.
6. Barba, Eugenio. *The Paper Canoe : A Guide To Theatre Anthropology*. n.p.: London ; New York : Routledge, 1995.
7. Frank, Kevin. "Orientation and Empathic Resonance Considered as Psychobiological Elements in Structural Integration". *Structural Integration*, p.2-5, June 2011
8. Burrows, Jonathan. *A Choreographer's Handbook*. n.p.: Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York : Routledge, 2010.