

# Unit 41: Dance Improvisation

**Unit code:** A/502/4915

**QCF Level 3:** BTEC National

**Credit value:** 10

**Guided learning hours:** 60

## ● Aim and purpose

This unit will enable learners to develop an understanding of the various improvisational structures and methods needed to aid creativity. It will allow a clear picture of the place and use of improvisation in all its contexts.

## ● Unit introduction

As a dancer you could be asked to improvise in order to generate ideas, create transitions, extend taught material or develop an understanding of a choreographer's style. Equally you may be required to improvise within a performance piece or participate in contact improvisation. Even at a dance audition you could be asked to improvise around a given stimulus. It is therefore essential to be a creative and responsive dancer. This unit is aimed at assisting such development.

Emphasis is on practical work, building confidence in response to given stimuli and doing so with focus, conviction and projection. Learners will be encouraged to develop improvisational skills as well as maintaining technical proficiency in their performance of structured improvisations. The experience during the process of improvisation is crucial and will ultimately form the basis for learning. Learners will explore stimuli from a variety of sources taking into account developments in technology. Creative responses to stimuli can in turn generate appropriate and innovative work. An important part of the process is to be reflective and review improvisational and creative skills in response to the stimuli. This will also allow learners to broaden their movement vocabulary and physical range.

Learners who complete this unit will gain insight as well as first-hand experience into improvisation whether as process, performance or creative tool. This unit links suitably with many units from technical through to those that are more choreographic and performance based. It provides essential skills for anyone wishing to pursue a career in the dance profession.

## ● Learning outcomes

**On completion of this unit a learner should:**

- 1 Be able to apply improvisational methods and structures
- 2 Be able to explore different stimuli
- 3 Be able to use performance skills in improvisation
- 4 Understand the effectiveness of improvisation.

# Unit content

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## 1 Be able to apply improvisational methods and structures

*Methods:* spontaneity; interaction; action and reaction; thinking ahead; response; looking for openings; stillness; perceptiveness; adaptability; taking weight; trust; lifting; catching

*Structures:* pure improvisation; contact improvisation; choreographic; selection and refinement; motif development, mixing improvisation and choreography in performance; different stimuli

## 2 Be able to explore different stimuli

*Stimuli:* eg visual images, moving images, digital images, artefacts, music, sound effects, live sounds, spoken works, poems, stories, literary and non-literary texts

*Communication:* emotions; feelings; reactions; ideas; intentions; attitudes; mood

## 3 Be able to use performance skills in improvisation

*Artistic:* communicating intention; interpretation; expressive qualities in improvisation

*Technical:* control; balance; accuracy; use of line; application of appropriate dance techniques to improvisation

## 4 Understand the effectiveness of improvisation

*Effectiveness:* use of improvisation as choreographic method; range of movement vocabulary; understanding of process; response to stimuli; strengths and weaknesses; pushing technical boundaries

## Assessment and grading criteria

In order to pass this unit, the evidence that the learner presents for assessment needs to demonstrate that they can meet all the learning outcomes for the unit. The assessment criteria for a pass grade describe the level of achievement required to pass this unit.

| <b>Assessment and grading criteria</b>                                                                                   |                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>To achieve a pass grade the evidence must show that the learner is able to:</b>                                       | <b>To achieve a merit grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass criteria, the learner is able to:</b>     | <b>To achieve a distinction grade the evidence must show that, in addition to the pass and merit criteria, the learner is able to:</b> |
| <b>P1</b> apply improvisational methods and structures in dance improvisation [EP]                                       | <b>M1</b> demonstrate the ability to use improvisational methods and structures with confidence                            | <b>D1</b> demonstrate the ability to use improvisational methods and structures with confidence and insight                            |
| <b>P2</b> respond to stimulus material, exploring the possibilities available in the use of dance improvisation [IE, CT] | <b>M2</b> respond in a considered way to stimulus material, showing a willingness to go beyond exploring the obvious       | <b>D2</b> respond in detail to stimulus material, exploring the possibilities in a perceptive and comprehensive manner                 |
| <b>P3</b> communicate themes through the use of dance improvisation suggested by stimuli [CT]                            | <b>M3</b> effectively communicate the themes suggested by the stimuli                                                      | <b>D3</b> effectively communicate the themes suggested by the stimuli, with dramatic effect                                            |
| <b>P4</b> maintain artistic and technical skills whilst improvising. [EP, SM]                                            | <b>M4</b> maintain performance skills whilst improvising as well as demonstrating dance technique                          | <b>D4</b> maintain performance skills confidently whilst improvising as well as demonstrating technical proficiency                    |
| <b>P5</b> evaluate the effectiveness of improvisation in which judgements are made regarding process. [RL]               | <b>M5</b> evaluate the effectiveness of improvisation in which clear and considered judgements are made regarding process. | <b>D5</b> evaluate the effectiveness of improvisation in which judgements are fully justified and there is clear evidence of analysis. |

**PLTS:** This summary references where applicable, in the square brackets, the elements of the personal, learning and thinking skills applicable in the pass criteria. It identifies opportunities for learners to demonstrate effective application of the referenced elements of the skills.

|            |                                                      |                                               |                                                    |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b> | IE – independent enquirers<br>CT – creative thinkers | RL – reflective learners<br>TW – team workers | SM – self-managers<br>EP – effective participators |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|

# Essential guidance for tutors

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## Delivery

An active, experimental and experiential approach is needed for this unit, with time allowed to explore and create. Learners should be encouraged to improvise in response to a variety of stimuli, methods and structures. The emphasis of the unit is on process and building improvisational skills through practical workshops.

Learners should be given time to select and refine material from improvisation to create choreography. This will aid their understanding of the integral role of improvisation within the choreographic process. In addition, learners should recognise the importance of 'pure' improvisation as a dance genre.

It is expected that centres will explore the method of contact improvisation (this is explored in more depth in the *Exploring Contact Improvisation* unit). This will allow learners to build improvisational skills with emphasis on weight-bearing partner/group work. Learner are required to consider the thoughts and placement of another body as well as their own. This will require them to understand the techniques of support work, use of weight, communication and safe practice. Contact improvisation requires different skills from those used in the process of choreography and pure improvisation. It is essential that learners are given the opportunity to experience all of these.

The role of the tutor is to supply learners with a wide range of stimuli and to allow time for confidence and skills to develop. Initially, small tasks with emphasis on participation and response will introduce learners to the skills needed to improvise. These skills will develop over a period of time as tasks become more substantial allowing full focus on innovative movement vocabulary and performance. It may be useful to film improvisational sessions so that learners can make judgements about the success of their work in relation to the given starting point.

The process of improvisation requires rapid response and sophistication in the selection of appropriate movement. Learners will need to have the opportunity to respond initially to stimuli, and time to expand and explore these responses. This can be done through a range of methods including workshops, individual response to stimuli and structured group improvisation with taught material. Improvisation can be taken as an essential dance skill in its own right.

Alternatively, centres may wish to design assignments that build from improvisation through to finished pieces of choreography and evaluation. For example the tutor could provide an image as a stimulus. Learners must employ methods and structures in response to this. Improvised material can then be selected and refined, culminating in a piece of choreography. A written evaluation about the success of the process and end result could be the final component. The nature of the unit does allow for separation of criteria however, for example grading criteria 2 and 3 could be assessed during a stimulus-related task. Learners must demonstrate all of the criteria in at least two assignments.

Learners should be encouraged to observe recordings of their individual performances of exercises, sequences, combinations and set studies, evaluate their own progress and identify and set targets to aid further development. Learners could also encourage peers giving direction and receiving simple targets. The content and outcomes of this unit should be demonstrated through the development of practical skills.

## Outline learning plan

The outline learning plan has been included in this unit as guidance and can be used in conjunction with the programme of suggested assignments.

The outline learning plan demonstrates one way in planning the delivery and assessment of this unit.

### Topic and suggested assignments/activities and/assessment

Introduction:

What is improvisation? When is it used and why is it useful for a dancer?

- Tutor-led group discussion.
- Practical workshops exploring different genres and styles of music as well as methods and structures.

#### Assignment 1: Improvising in Response to Aural and Visual Stimuli

- Learners select a piece of music as stimulus and take part in improvisational tasks.
- Tutors select a painting/image as stimulus and take part in improvisational tasks.
- These tasks could provide evidence for assessment.

Communication of meaning/intent

- How can mood, feelings, emotions, attitude, etc be communicated through improvisation? Learners brainstorm the question in small groups and come together to discuss their findings.
- Tutor-led tasks exploring practically the factors listed above.

#### Assignment 2: Improvising with a Partner – P1, M1, D1, P2, M2, D2, P3, M3, D3, P4, M4, D4

- Practical task using relationships as a starting point (action/reaction, question/answer, contrast/complement).
- These improvisations are then developed into duets by learners and filmed for assessment purposes.

#### Assignment 3: Prop Improvisation – P1, M1, D1, P2, M2, D2, P3, M3, D3, P4, M4, D4, P5, M5, D5

- Group discussion about the selected props and the potential of each one.
- Learners improvise with selected props and take part in tasks relating to props. One prop is chosen for developmental work.
- Prop solos are created through selection and refinement of movement. They are then filmed.
- Learners write reflectively about their solo pieces of choreography.

#### Assignment 4: Part-live/part-structured Improvisation (a combination of taught material and live improvisation – P1, M1, D1, P2, M2, D2, P3, M3, D3, P4, M4, D4, P5, M5, D5

- Tutor provides guidelines as to structure of piece (musical cues or sections).
- Learners participate in rehearsals of part live/part structured improvisation.
- The piece is performed for an audience.
- Learners write reflectively about their participation in the improvisation.

## Assessment

Due to the spontaneous nature of this unit it is essential to capture the essence of improvising. This will require numerous video recordings of the sessions and it may be good practice to film the majority of the classes. This will allow learners to have a variety of their work documented, given that the process of improvisation is unpredictable.

Suitable assessment evidence may be in the form of video recordings of improvisations, for example for criteria 1-4. Written/oral reflections referring to the effectiveness of the process would provide suitable evidence for criterion 5. Alternatively for criterion 5, a question-and-answer session with the tutor or group discussion could be recorded as evidence on video/audio tape. A working notebook, improvisational journal or tutor and peer observation sheets could also provide a record of improvisations and development of skill. Although criteria 1-4 are essentially practically-based, notes taken during these processes can provide valuable input when it comes to fulfilling the requirements for criterion 5.

It is suggested that learners provide at least two pieces of evidence for assessment. These need to include one piece which is part of the choreographic process and another piece of pure improvisation (this could be contact work, response to stimuli or group improvisation) The pieces should last approximately two to three minutes. Grading criteria can be assessed separately or as a whole, as outlined in the programme of suggested assignments. This unit requires a bulk of evidence so as to capture the process.

Learners achieving D1 would apply methods and structures imaginatively and with confidence; original and creative movement would be performed, with learners succeeding in interacting, taking weight, looking for openings and responding effectively. For M1, learners may display these skills but be less confident in their execution. For P1, learners, some elements of the improvisation process would be demonstrated, for example trust work, whereas others such as spontaneity may be limited.

When using a prop as stimulus, for P2 learners would provide simple examples of how it could be manipulated. Subsequently, a limited communication of themes would be evident (P3.) For D2, learners would work experimentally, exploring the full potential of the prop in an original manner. The themes communicated would be effective but also have impact (D3). For M2, learners would show effective exploration of the prop but not to its fullest potential. The themes would be communicated successfully (M3).

For P4, learners would use projection and expressive qualities whilst improvising, but perhaps wouldn't display full extension of limbs, use of control, balance and alignment for example. For M4, learners would demonstrate competency in technical areas in addition to improvising with performance skills. To gain a distinction for criteria 4, learners would be expected to demonstrate high standards of technique whilst performing improvisations successfully.

For P5, learners would be documenting what worked well/less well during their experience of improvisations. Going beyond this, for M5 learners would also address why certain areas worked well/less well. Consequently, for D5 learners would analyse strengths and weaknesses, providing detailed reasoning and suggestions for future improvements.

## Programme of suggested assignments

The table below shows a programme of suggested assignments that cover the pass, merit and distinction criteria in the assessment and grading grid. This is for guidance and it is recommended that centres either write their own assignments or adapt any Edexcel assignments to meet local needs and resources.

| Criteria covered                                                       | Assignment title              | Scenario                                                                                                                                                                                   | Assessment method                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| P2, M2, D2,<br>P3, M3, D3                                              | Aural Stimulus                | Learners select a piece of music as stimulus and take part in improvisational tasks.                                                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Filming of improvisations.</li> <li>• Observation sheets.</li> </ul>                                                                          |
| P2, M2, D2,<br>P3, M3, D3                                              | Visual Stimulus               | Tutors provide a painting/ image for learners which they use as stimulus for improvisational tasks.                                                                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Filming of improvisations.</li> <li>• Observation sheets.</li> </ul>                                                                          |
| P1, M1, D1,<br>P2, M2, D2,<br>P3, M3, D3,<br>P4, M4, D4                | Improvising with a Partner    | Duets are created following the improvisation process - the stimulus is 'Relationships'.                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Filming of improvisations.</li> <li>• Observation sheets.</li> <li>• Filming of final piece.</li> </ul>                                       |
| P1, M1, D1,<br>P2, M2, D2,<br>P3, M3, D3,<br>P4, M4, D4,<br>P5, M5, D5 | Prop Improvisation            | Learners select a prop with which they improvise and then use selection and refinement to create a solo. Learners then write reflectively about their work (or Viva).                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Filming of improvisations.</li> <li>• Observation sheets.</li> <li>• Filming of final piece.</li> <li>• Written/verbal evaluation.</li> </ul> |
| P1, M1, D1,<br>P2, M2, D2,<br>P3, M3, D3,<br>P4, M4, D4,<br>P5, M5, D5 | Live/Structured Improvisation | Learners participate in a part-live, part-structured improvisation. Taught material and structures are provided by the tutor. Learners then write reflectively about their work (or Viva). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Filming of improvisations.</li> <li>• Observation sheets.</li> <li>• Filming of final piece.</li> <li>• Written/verbal evaluation.</li> </ul> |

## Links to National Occupational Standards, other BTEC units, other BTEC qualifications and other relevant units and qualifications

This unit forms part of the BTEC Performing and Production Arts sector suite. This unit has particular links with the following unit titles in the BTEC Performing and Production Arts suite:

| Level 1                | Level 2                  | Level 3                         |
|------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Exploring Dance Skills | The Development of Dance | Choreographic Principles        |
|                        | Performing Dance         | Developing Movement Skills      |
|                        | Contemporary Dance       | Exploring Contact Improvisation |

## Essential resources

Learners will need to have access to a working space/dance studio, preferably with sprung floor. A range of starting points and stimuli will need to be provided by the tutor (music, text, poems, pictures, abstract concepts, multimedia etc). A video recorder and playback facilities are required to record evidence and enable the learners to evaluate their progress.

## Employer engagement and vocational contexts

Centres are encouraged to develop links with professional dance companies, choreographers, local universities and dance colleges specialising in this field. This could be in the form of talks, demonstrations, workshops, performance opportunities, theatre visits, and any education resources that are available to centres.

## Indicative reading for learners

### Textbooks

Albright A C and Gere D – *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader* (Wesleyan University Press, 2003)  
ISBN 9780819566485

Blom L A and Chaplin T – *The Moment of Movement: Dance Improvisation* (Dance Books, 2000)  
ISBN 9781852730093

Cerny Minton S – *Choreography: A Basic Approach Using Improvisation* (Europe Ltd, 1997)  
ISBN 9780880115292

Kaltenbrunner T – *Contact Improvisation, 2nd Edition* (Meyer & Meyer Sports Books, 2003)  
ISBN 9781841261386

Tufnell M and Crickmay C – *A Widening Field: Journeys in Body and Imagination* (Dance Books, 2003)  
ISBN 9781852730963

Tufnell M and Crickmay C – *Body Space Image: Notes Towards Improvisation and Performance* (Dance Books, 2003) ISBN 9781853811319

### Website

[www.ivarhagendoorn.com](http://www.ivarhagendoorn.com)

Emergent Patterns in Dance Improvisation and Choreography

## Delivery of personal, learning and thinking skills

The table below identifies the opportunities for personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS) that have been included within the pass assessment criteria of this unit.

| <b>Skill</b>                  | <b>When learners are ...</b>                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Independent enquirers</b>  | researching stimuli for improvisation                                                                                    |
| <b>Creative thinkers</b>      | providing appropriate responses to stimuli                                                                               |
| <b>Reflective learners</b>    | making judgements about the strengths and weaknesses of the improvisation process and suggesting targets for development |
| <b>Team workers</b>           | reliable during contact improvisation                                                                                    |
| <b>Self-managers</b>          | taking responsibility for maintaining technique during the improvisation process                                         |
| <b>Effective participants</b> | taking part in pair/group improvisations.                                                                                |

Although PLTS are identified within this unit as an inherent part of the assessment criteria, there are further opportunities to develop a range of PLTS through various approaches to teaching and learning.

| <b>Skill</b>                  | <b>When learners are ...</b>                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Independent enquirers</b>  | researching of stimuli for improvisation                                                                      |
| <b>Creative thinkers</b>      | exploring fully the potential of the stimuli                                                                  |
| <b>Reflective learners</b>    | providing in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the process with clear targets for improvement |
| <b>Team workers</b>           | trusting and fully co-operating during contact improvisation                                                  |
| <b>Self-managers</b>          | demonstrating technical expertise during the improvisation process                                            |
| <b>Effective participants</b> | taking part in pair/group improvisations with confidence.                                                     |

## ● Functional Skills – Level 2

| Skill                                                                                                                                     | When learners are ...                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| ICT                                                                                                                                       |                                                     |
| Present information in ways that are fit for purpose and audience                                                                         | wordprocessing evaluations                          |
| English                                                                                                                                   |                                                     |
| Speaking and listening – make a range of contributions to discussions and make effective presentations in a wide range of contexts        | participating in discussions about improvisation    |
| Reading – compare, select, read and understand texts and use them to gather information, ideas, arguments and opinions                    | using poems/literature as stimuli for improvisation |
| Writing – write documents, including extended writing pieces, communicating information, ideas and opinions, effectively and persuasively | writing an evaluation about the creative process.   |