

# Unit 53: Exploring Contact Improvisation

**Unit code:** F/502/4902

**QCF Level 3:** BTEC National

**Credit value:** 10

**Guided learning hours:** 60

## ● Aim and purpose

In this unit learners are encouraged to discover the underlying concepts of contact improvisation, exploring how dancers can successfully shift weight through space, reacting to other bodies, objects and varying forces.

## ● Unit introduction

Contact improvisation is an innovative, very physical and thought-provoking style of dance. It allows dancers to use their brain, body and sensitivity to gravity, other dancers and momentum to create breath-taking moments in dance. It is these moments in the dance that make an audience gasp at the way dancers create the illusion of risk and demonstrate clever phrasing and innovative material. Performing contact improvisation can be like a dynamic chess game for the body and mind. Each moment demands a movement response and the most amazing, ground-breaking choreography can often be generated.

Many dance companies, choreographers and dance for camera directors use contact improvisation as a choreographic tool and many dance companies use lifts, counterbalances and supporting actions in contemporary works. Contact improvisation technique is essential for anyone intending to work in choreography and performance.

This unit aims to give learners the underpinning knowledge of the basic skills and interactions, taking into consideration other dancers, spontaneous artistic contribution, ways to support self and other dancers whilst still being responsible and aware. The unit also aims to equip learners with a basic variety of dynamic responses through their involvement in the improvisation process. Improvisers can employ various styles of dance such as tango, lindy hop, contemporary dance when relating to other dancers and even free running and physical theatre concepts can be investigated in relation to props, sets and sites. To achieve success learners will need to give and take weight, adhering to the rules of lifting as well as dance studio etiquette. They must also be responsible for themselves as they move.

**Learners will be assessed through at least three structured improvisational performances lasting two minutes each.**

## ● Learning outcomes

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

- 1 Be able to demonstrate awareness of movement flow and underpinning principles of contact
- 2 Be able to explore contact with stimuli and with other dancers
- 3 Be able to improvise using the dynamics in performance.

# Unit content

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## 1 Be able to demonstrate awareness of movement flow and underpinning principles of contact

*Health and safety:* warm-up; appropriate clothing; responsiveness to direction; safe practice; group awareness

*Using different styles as starting points:* eg release technique, Humphrey, Limon, Skinner Release, yoga, tango, free running, site-specific dance, Alexander Technique, Ideokinesis, Feldenkrais Method, breakdancing, martial arts, capoeira

*Phrasing:* use of breath; falling; recovering; suspension; weight transfer

## 2 Be able to explore contact with stimuli and with other dancers

*Exploring contact with stimuli:* through communication and exchange between various surfaces eg the floor, properties, sites, environments, other dancers, different parts of the body of self and other learners

*Exploring contact with other dancers:* counterbalances; lifting techniques; catches; supports; point-to-point contact; trust exercises

## 3 Be able to improvise using the dynamics in performance

*Dynamics:* creation of and reaction to flow; weight; time; mass

*Anatomical implications:* economy of movements; paths of least resistance; using own movement potential; directing awareness inside the body

*Developing improvisational responses:* initiating; absorbing; rebounding; continuing; increasing the movement and momentum; various responses to impact; impulse and inertia

**Learners will be assessed through at least three structured improvisational performances lasting two minutes each.**

# 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> demonstrate discipline and focus when working within the majority of classes [SM]              | <b>M1</b> demonstrate discipline, focus and a professional approach to working within all classes                                 | <b>D1</b> demonstrate a highly disciplined and professional approach to all classes   |
| <b>P2</b> demonstrate the ability to explore the phrasing of fall and recovery [CT]                      | <b>M2</b> demonstrate the ability to explore the phrasing of fall and recovery with suspension                                    | <b>D2</b> demonstrate a highly developed appreciation of the phrasing of fall and recovery with use of suspension                             |
| <b>P3</b> recognise the obvious possibilities in response to contact with stimulus material [IE, CT, SM] | <b>M3</b> respond in a considered way to contact with stimulus material, showing a willingness to go beyond exploring the obvious | <b>D3</b> respond in detail to contact with stimulus material in a perceptive and comprehensive manner, overcoming obvious movement responses |
| <b>P4</b> demonstrate an awareness of how the body can give and take weight [TW]                         | <b>M4</b> demonstrate a clear awareness of how the body can give and take weight  | <b>D4</b> demonstrate an in-depth awareness of how the body can actively give and passively take weight                                       |
| <b>P5</b> show an awareness of how dynamics affect creation and reaction in improvisation in performance | <b>M5</b> show a clear awareness of how dynamics affect creation and reaction in improvisation in performance                     | <b>D5</b> show an in-depth awareness of how dynamics affect creation and reaction in improvisation in performance                             |
| <b>P6</b> demonstrate responses to energy that show awareness of anatomical implications. [IE, CT]       | <b>M6</b> demonstrate considered responses to energy that show awareness of anatomical implications.                              | <b>D6</b> demonstrate in depth responses to energy that show awareness of anatomical implications.  |

**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**

This unit will be delivered through structured workshops and classes, which may draw on a range of dance styles as a starting point and various responses to other stimuli. This could include release technique to get learners used to their own anatomical form and the creation of sites in the learning environment for learners to explore.

All classes or workshops need to follow a similar structure of warm-up, pointing out safe practice, sharing and watching creation and responses of other learners. This needs to be taught over a number of weeks to enable learners to develop understanding of their bodies' response to giving of weight successfully, take the weight of other learners in a considered way, increase movement memory and challenge abilities.

Whilst a basic grounding in dance practice is invaluable, no previous dance experience is necessary for this unit. However, learners should be aware that attendance at regular classes and workshops will help them achieve the awareness of dynamics this style of dance requires in performance. Learners need to be responsible for their own weight in any lifts and counterbalances and have an awareness of safety issues. Tutors may want to put strength exercises into the warm-up to develop learners' endurance.

This unit will provide learners with a solid foundation in contact improvisation. Learners need to be given opportunities to perform improvisations throughout the process to other learners because, as observers, they can often gain an understanding of how to interact and react to others. Learners should be encouraged to observe recordings of their individual and group performances of improvisations, structured improvisations and developed contact work. The content and outcomes of this unit should be demonstrated through the development of practical skills.

The focus of the unit is on the exploration of movement, flow and dynamics, with an awareness of how gravity can be used to aid learners in the giving and taking of weight. Workshops could be set up to explore the contact between different parts of the body, leading to manipulation of other dancers with any chosen dynamic. Learners could also link a series of lifts that have been developed into a short improvisation or a structured improvisation where the counterbalances and lifts are performed in a group on a command or beginning movement. Whilst the tutor may choreograph some simple lifts, counterbalances and interactions between learners as a grounding, learners are encouraged to develop their own ideas. First-hand experience of how to lift and be lifted is all part of the process of exploration for learners.

Learners will need to have, or develop quickly, a mature approach to this style of dance, as there are health and safety implications. It is possible for learners to enjoy every aspect of this style if rules, boundaries and a greater understanding of how to lift and be lifted can be employed. Tutors may want to discuss with learners what is expected of them before they embark on any movement investigation so that a clear list of safety tips can be put into place in workshops. Dancers should understand that weight can be successfully given to another dancer if they themselves are willing and that the skeleton can take 'loads' successfully with the help of gravity. In some cases it may be as simple as bending the knees and not lifting with the back.

## 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  |
|--|
| Discussion on health and safety factors and demands, expectations of the unit. Looking at anatomical implications.   |
| Working through the body using release technique to find how gravity can aid movement and dynamics. This could be a warm-up that uses the floor at a low level, ways of going into and out of the floor using suspend, fall and recovery. Training learners to be responsible for their own weight. A set of classes to build strength and understanding.  |
| Simple contact moments. Using improvisations in duets and small groups where they make contact points with each other eg elbow to another dancer's knee and find ways of travelling. This could also be sculpting with body parts being manipulated by other learners to start to respond to given energy to start using with release ideas.   |
| Watching contact moments on DVD, video eg Union Dance, Rambert Dance Company, Richard Alston Dance Company, Random Dance Company, Jasmin Vardamon Dance Company.   |
| <b>Assignment 1: Group Improvisation – P1, M1, D1 P2, M2, D2 P5, M5, D5 P6, M6, D6</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Involve stillness, contact points, release ideas – all covered to date.</li></ul>   |
| Counterbalance workshops with given counterbalances and further developments to prompt innovative responses. Workshop 1 (counterbalance) – back-to-back, holding hands going up and down, swapping hands, travelling and meeting, discovering other counterbalances in pairs and small groups, swapping and trying each others' ideas. Repeating ideas a week later lets them 'bed' in with learners and also allows developing confidence before going onto next workshop. 2 x 2 hours. |
| Workshop 2 – Exploring the space around dancers, filling space, seeing if limbs can be pushed, pulled to create counterbalances. Travelling whilst finding counterbalances.  |
| Workshop 3 – Given counterbalances either by tutor or from professional repertoire shown on video, ways to work in groups and start to give own weight to other learners with confidence.  |
| <b>Assignment 2: Manipulation and Counterbalance – P1, M1, D1, P2, M2, D2, P3, M3, D3, P4, M4, D4, P5, M5, D5, P6, M6, D6</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In small groups creating a travelling sequence that explores space, around each other, finds counterbalance moments, gives and takes weight, uses suspension, fall and recovery to continue the sequence with fluidity.</li></ul>  |
| Three more workshops – this time with the theme of 'lifting' giving and taking whole body weight. Tutor to go through given lifts with health and safety tips for correct lifting in workshop 1, to find ways into these lifts workshop 2, to create own lifts and ways of safely going into and out of the shapes.  |
| <b>Assignment 3: Lifts, Counterbalance and Using Weight – P1, M1, D1, P2, M2, D2, P3, M3, D3, P4, M4, D4 P5, M5, D5, P6, M6, D6</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In small groups creating a travelling sequence that explores lifts, finds counter balance moments, gives and takes weight, uses suspension, fall and recovery to continue the sequence with fluidity.</li></ul>  |
| Workshops and improvisations that use all learnt so far and starts to employ props, narratives, direction, music, restrictions, performance.   |
| <b>Assignment 4: Improvisations as Assessment – P1, M1, D1, P2, M2, D2, P3, M3, D3, P4, M4, D4, P5, M5, D5, P6, M6, D6</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Using a different theme or idea to keep the performances improvised.</li></ul>  |

## Assessment

The work produced for this unit should clearly communicate the principles of contact improvisation. This may be in the form of workshops, structured improvisations or choreographies developed from the giving and taking of weight explored between learners. As learners become more and more confident of their abilities to pre-empt other learners' actions, performance opportunities can present themselves. Therefore short platforms showcasing learners' skills called 'jams' can take place. Learners themselves can run these regularly so that strength and coordination can develop. Learners can often develop interesting movements, phrases and lifts that they could share with the other learners as part of the exploration.

Evidence will take the form of video recordings, tutor feedback and observation, learner evaluations or witness statements. Learners will present improvisational performances of duets and group pieces to the tutor, other learners and other audiences for feedback by the tutor.

Expertise and development in exploring this unit should be demonstrated in at least three structured improvisational performances lasting 2–3 minutes each. The unit does not demand written work in the assessment but tutors may wish learners to produce notes for evaluation of their own and other improvisations they watch. While learners will be assessed for their practical involvement, it is essential that observation and appreciation of other learners is taken into account as part of the development process.

**Learners will be assessed through at least three structured improvisational performances lasting two minutes each.**

Learning outcome 1 requires learners to understand the principles behind this dance style. It is important that health and safety aspects underpin the practical styles used without hindering the natural phrasing of the movement material. Differentiation between pass, merit and distinction will be apparent through the depth of not only understanding in the body but also the learners' ability to be responsible in all improvisations. Learners will need to explore the phrasing of this style and demonstrate their understanding in workshops and classes in either duets, trios, quartets, whole group improvisations or a mixture of these. Improvisations can be very open or structured.

Grading criteria 1 and 2:

- At pass level, learners will be able to identify safety considerations when working with others but they may have lapses in discipline in several classes. When using contact improvisation they may only be able to select simple falling and recovery movements to perform successfully or rely on given movements without finding the suspension and ongoing fluidity for themselves. They may be efficient in performing these features but if they do not explore other possibilities they are just using simple 'fall and recovery' and therefore are working at a pass.
- At merit level, learners will be able to be aware of what movements will need extra attention and risks will be assessed in a mature and disciplined way with a clear awareness of health and safety implications. Learners achieving merit will be able to demonstrate a more developed understanding of the phrasing needed giving attention to details such as suspension, highpoints and breath. They will be keen to try inventive new ways to fall and recover with suspension in improvisations and not rely on given material.
- At distinction level, learners will have a mature and disciplined approach to all sessions having a strong awareness of health and safety implications. Learners achieving distinction will be able to demonstrate their understanding of fall and recovery in the body using nearly all new movement material and being true to the 'moment'. Distinction learners will have an elegance about their work and a greater understanding of the movement choices they are making in response to other dancers.

Learning outcome 2 requires learners to use points of contact with other dancers that can lead into the giving and taking of weight. Differentiation between pass, merit and distinction will be apparent through the way in which learners explore and develop skills with an open mind. Learners can also explore other stimuli to make contact with but to achieve grading criterion 4 they will need to develop bodily contact skills giving their own weight and how to successfully take weight.

#### Grading criteria 3 and 4:

- At pass level, learners will be able to make contact with and use stimuli materials with some consideration of the fluidity and phrasing. They will be able to either give or take weight and may struggle with lifting other learners. Weight taking may rely on given movement material, simple counterbalances and learners may produce some obvious movement answers.
- At merit level, learners will be able to make contact with and use stimuli materials with a consideration of the fluidity and phrasing. They will be able to give and take weight and be keen to try out different ways of lifting other learners. Weight taking may use given movement material, counterbalances and lifts but learners will produce this with an understanding of the flow of the movement with some innovative moments.
- At distinction level, learners will be able to make contact with and use stimuli materials with a strong consideration of the fluidity and phrasing. They will be able to give and take weight successfully and be keen to try out and perfect different ways of lifting other learners. Weight taking may rarely use given movement material, counterbalances and lifts as learners will produce original and innovative movement answers for themselves.

Learning outcome 3 requires learners to perform moments of contact improvisation with an awareness of dynamics. Differentiation between pass, merit and distinction will be evident through learners' ability to react to and create different energy responses to the stimuli with an awareness of their own and other learners' anatomy and use of gravity.

#### Grading criteria 5 and 6:

- At pass level, learners will create movement material that has some consideration of where it started in the body and where it can then go in the improvisation. They may often respond to others' direction and touch with an inappropriate dynamic or they will not use the whole body in responding to a dynamic hence losing the fluidity of the improvisation.
- At merit level, learners will create movement material that considered where it started in the body and where it can then go in the improvisation. They will respond to others' direction and touch with an appropriate dynamic but may struggle to involve the whole body in their response to a dynamic.
- At distinction level, learners will create movement material with a developed understanding of where it started in the body and where it can then go in the improvisation. They will create and react with confidence knowing that they are in control of the whole body and where their weight is. They will respond to others' direction and touch with a wholly appropriate dynamic and a strong understanding of the anatomical aspects of other learners as well as themselves.

## 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   |
|---|---|---|---|
| P1, M1, D1,<br>P2, M2, D2,<br>P5, M5, D5,<br>P6, M6, D6                               | Group Improvisation 1.<br>This type of assessment task can be given at any point. | Learners have covered some simple skills in contact. This assessment will involve stillness, contact points and release ideas.  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performance to peers in small groups (recorded on DVD).</li> <li>Tutor observation.</li> </ul>                   |
| P1, M1, D1,<br>P2, M2, D2,<br>P3, M3, D3,<br>P4, M4, D4,<br>P5, M5, D5,<br>P6, M6, D6 | Manipulation and Counterbalance   | In small groups creating a travelling sequence that explores space, around each other, finds counterbalance moments, gives and takes weight, uses suspension, fall and recovery to continue the sequence with fluidity.                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performance to peers in small groups lasting 2 minutes (recorded on DVD).</li> <li>Tutor observation.</li> </ul> |
| P1, M1, D1,<br>P2, M2, D2,<br>P3, M3, D3,<br>P4, M4, D4,<br>P5, M5, D5,<br>P6, M6, D6 | Lifting and Learning  | Learners to use all skills and confidence gained to create improvisations using lifts as well as other ways to give and take weight to get across an idea or narrative in performance, eg supportive relationships or different emotions. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performance in an audience in pairs lasting 2 minutes (recorded on DVD).</li> <li>Tutor observation.</li> </ul>  |
| P1, M1, D1,<br>P2, M2, D2,<br>P3, M3, D3,<br>P4, M4, D4,<br>P5, M5, D5,<br>P6, M6, D6 | Contact Choreography in Performance   | Learners to create a duet of a chosen theme to present in a theatre setting. Learners must choreograph a fluid piece of dance that uses the giving and taking of weight to create an innovative performance.                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performance to an audience lasting more than 2 minutes (recorded on DVD).</li> <li>Tutor observation.</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 | Contemporary Dance       | Developing Physical Theatre |
|                        | The Development of Dance | Dance Performance           |
|                        |                          | Choreographic Principles    |
|                        |                          | Choreographing Dance        |
|                        |                          | Applying Contemporary Dance |
|                        |                          | Dance Improvisation         |

## Essential resources

A practical dance space will be required preferably with a suitably covered sprung floor. Access to sound equipment and/or accompanist, a video camera and video playback facilities would be useful. Tutors may want to use gymnasium equipment to aid the demonstration of safe practice or to create environments in which learners can explore.

It is important to assess the dance space that you are using before embarking on certain aspects of this unit, eg is the ceiling the appropriate height for lifting movements.

## Employer engagement and vocational contexts

Centres are encouraged to develop links with professional dance companies, choreographers, local universities and dance colleges and dancers in the dance world. This could be talks, demonstrations, workshops, classes, taught repertoire, performance opportunities, visits to the theatre, visiting performances to centres and education resources that are available to centres.

## Indicative reading for learners

### Textbooks

Banes S – *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theatre 1962-1964* (Duke University Press, 1993)  
ISBN 9780822313991

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

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

### Journal

*Contact Quarterly* A vehicle for moving ideas.  
Address: Contact Quarterly, PO Box 603, Northampton, Mass. 01061 USA

### Website

[www.dancebooks.co.uk](http://www.dancebooks.co.uk) International centre for dance books and resources

## 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>  | using all the skills gained in contact moments<br>responding to movement problems as they arise in improvisations                   |
| <b>Creative thinkers</b>      | creating new and innovative movement answers relating to other dancers  |
| <b>Reflective learners</b>    | watching themselves on video reviewing their and their peers progress and performance   |
| <b>Team workers</b>           | working in small groups considering how to effectively take and give weight<br>being responsible<br>collaborating on choreographies |
| <b>Self-managers</b>          | improving their own performance<br>organising rehearsal time<br>responding to direction from tutor and peers.                       |
| <b>Effective participants</b> | working in groups on choreographic ideas<br>negotiating movements answers and proposing practical ways forward.                     |

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 dance companies<br>exploring issues or events that could be used as stimuli  |
| <b>Creative thinkers</b>      | generating ideas and collecting stimuli for use in choreography  |
| <b>Reflective learners</b>    | considering their own performance from feedback and evaluating strengths and weaknesses<br>making future goals that are achievable           |
| <b>Team workers</b>           | working in a group to create a joint piece of choreography<br>collaborating on themes<br>providing support for other learners in the process |
| <b>Self-managers</b>          | researching dance pieces<br>visiting the theatre<br>planning rehearsal schedules   |
| <b>Effective participants</b> | working in groups to create choreography and performance pieces<br>offering beneficial suggestions for improvements.                         |

## ● Functional Skills – Level 2

| Skill  | When learners are ...   |
|--|---|
| <b>Mathematics</b>   |   |
| Understand routine and non-routine problems in a wide range of familiar and unfamiliar contexts and situations                     | using contact improvisation and skills learnt to date to create movement responses moment to moment |
| <b>English</b>   |   |
| Speaking and listening – make a range of contributions to discussions and make effective presentations in a wide range of contexts | discussing their own and others work<br>evaluating and appreciating dance.                          |