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To cite this article: Nina Martin (2017) Spontaneous Dancemaking with Beginning Improvisers: Foundational Practices in Presence, Stillness, and Problem Solving, Journal of Dance Education, 17:1, 27-30, DOI: [10.1080/15290824.2016.1228107](https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2016.1228107)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2016.1228107>



Published online: 31 Jan 2017.



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# Spontaneous Dancemaking with Beginning Improvisers

## Foundational Practices in Presence, Stillness, and Problem Solving

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Many dance artists in their first encounters with improvisational dance making begin not only to learn how to compose spontaneously, but also to gain skills for coping with the uncertainties inherent in the form. This article suggests helpful dance scores for beginning students of physical improvisation and those who teach improvisational dance-making practices. Dance scores presented here are especially helpful to students entering academic dance programs who have usually studied only codified dance forms. These beginning improvisers have substantial knowledge but often have little or no experience with using their previously learned knowledge in new ways while improvising. The scores suggested here and contained in the Appendix of resources use a performance mantra from Deborah Hay's choreographic process and scores from my dance system: ReWire—Dancing States. These processes offer beginning improvisers concrete choices to have a secure, but flexible performance state from which to spontaneously choreograph.

Students often enter into the study of improvisation with fears about how to create a dance on the spot. For many dancers, their prior training placed priority on knowing what they were doing in the moment and being certain of what movement came next. This often means they have yet to develop the skills necessary for choreographing in the moment and being confident within a variety of emergent dance-making processes. Curricula offered in this article can familiarize students with foundational processes that support the artist during inevitable moments of not knowing, which are often the most terrifying or challenging experiences for the beginning spontaneous choreographer.

A useful definition of improvisational dance making is the act of spontaneous dance composition comprised of implicit (habitual/prereflective actions) and explicit (consciously directed) choreographic actions (Martin 2013). Improvised choreography emerges then along a “continuum of deliberation” (Martin 2013) in novel combinations through time. Methodologies suggested here for teaching improvisational dance include somatic strategies that support the novice improviser or choreographer as he or she navigates shifting liminal states of knowing and not knowing.

### EMBODYING THE UNKNOWN

The elemental emotion of fear often undergirds the atmosphere in many beginning improvisation classes. The presence of fear makes sense when one considers the vulnerability of embodying the unknown—a necessary condition of spontaneous dance making. Beginning students of improvisational dance not only want to know what to do, but they also want to know how to be or how to exist through time in an improvisation where they do not know what is coming next.

Embodying a state of *not knowing* throughout an improvisation requires skills that support the improviser's transitions through a variety of commonly occurring activities such as observing, initiating, or responding. What follows are curricular suggestions organized under the three concepts of the practice of presence, the practice of stillness,

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at [www.tandfonline.com/UJOD](http://www.tandfonline.com/UJOD).



**FIGURE 1** Practicing presence, stillness, and problem solving. Photo by Alfredo Corvarubias (used with permission).

and the practice of problem solving, which offer students foundational strategies for navigating the uncertainties of spontaneous dance making (see Figure 1).

## THE PRACTICE OF PRESENCE

Beginning students of improvisational dance often go through a phase of self-consciousness as they try to figure out how to be or how to inhabit their improvisations while dancing with what can feel like a strangely unscripted body. This phase is particularly felt for students who have spent many years habituating themselves to codified dance forms in which they rarely found themselves without a body script or directed movement choices. The challenge is to foster a body state that allows one to “be in the moment” while surveying the emerging dance and what actions it might be calling for from a dancer.

Encouraging states of presence in the moment as a continuous underscore for the improvisation allows students to embody a state of being that supports them throughout the inescapable moments when they do not explicitly know what they are doing or what they shall do next. A baseline behavioral strategy is critical in improvisational dance because it is impossible on a cognitive level to consciously compose and track all that is transpiring in real time and on the preconscious level in the emerging choreography of the improvisation (Gallagher 2005). Much that one does in an improvisation derives from a preconscious state or what philosopher Erin Manning (2009) called a “feeling-with of the body moving” (46) that relies on one’s training and habits manifesting spontaneously. Manning recognized the necessity of working in a preconscious improvisational state, writing, “This feeling-with is a virtual dance. It is too quick for conscious thought, and yet it [the body] composes with it as a layering of felt experience in the making” (46).

Thus, an ability to be open and present in the moment is necessary to have a place from which to observe the landscape of the emerging improvisation. To be present or alert in the lived moment of creating a spontaneous choreography requires

the dance artist to navigate the inevitable challenge of being with oneself and being with the unpredictable and evolving improvisation.

## Invite Being Seen Score

I have found that using Hay’s (2000) “Invite Being Seen” performance mantra helps the student to embody a continuum of presence while negotiating real-time composition. Invite Being Seen, as I guide it, consists of each person (including the teacher) taking turns simply standing in front of the class for one to three minutes (or more) while he or she invites being seen by the observers and observes the responses to his or her performance. A timekeeper marks the time period and calls “End.” The point of the exercise is not to dance per se, but rather to simply stand and notice one’s response to an uncomfortable task. One student might look directly at his or her audience, whereas another might choose to look out the window and fidget. It is fascinating to see how many different solutions dancers come up with to fulfill the score and over time how they experiment with different ways to practice it. Although individual students might fulfill the Invite Being Seen exercise differently, the practice does create a way to inhabit an improvisation while tracking the performance environment and making choices for engagement.

Invite Being Seen is a vulnerable activity, even for advanced performers, and the tension in the room during this exercise is palpable. Novice improvisers, who might have previously thought that stillness is doing “nothing,” now realize that doing “nothing” is actually doing “something.” Performers learn to trust that simply being present within an improvisation and with an audience are dynamic actions and consequently have interest. At the end of the semester the Invite Being Seen practice begins each student’s culminating improvised solo. Invite Being Seen is a concrete activity that gives the improviser a focus from which to contemplate and observe both oneself and the world, during the complex whirlwind of dance improvisation. The Invite Being Seen practice supports an embodied presence through time: between what was, what is, and what is to come.

## THE PRACTICE OF STILLNESS

Practicing stillness for beginning improvisers is important because it counteracts the common impulse of improvisers to move about while figuring out their next action. Often movements that come from a nervous urge to move for movement’s sake can appear as a wandering, undirected activity that obscures the composition. To habituate and prime the dancer for maximum clarity, I advise students that stillness is often a stronger choice than aimless movement and also a sound compositional choice as it can help give more focus to another part of the improvisation or in some cases even take the focus. The following score helps a student to understand the difference between brain time and

body time and how stillness supports clear and precise action for the dancer.

## Dancing the Brain Score

Psychologist Benjamin Libet's (2004) research found that there is always a lag time between the moment one's body mobilizes for action and when one becomes conscious of starting the action and thus our sense of being in the present is always already in the past. As part of the Rewire–Dancing States system I teach scores such as Dancing the Brain, which attempts to work closely with the time lag that Libet speaks to. I sometimes call this score Single Frame Dancing or Dancing in the Gap due to the stop-action nature of the ensuing dance. These titles refer to the difficulty of improvising with a neuronal brain function that is faster than the body can match. The Dancing the Brain score requires one to make a noble effort to simultaneously move when a brain-generated image arises. To attempt, as nearly as possible, simultaneous brain–body action it is helpful for the body to be suspended in a ready (still) state to quickly spring into the physical manifestation of the image as it arises from the brain and is identified consciously. This exercise results in quite a bit of alert waiting, in a poised stillness, for the next image that one can manifest physically. The quality of stillness in this dance is similar to a predator waiting in a bound state to pounce on its next meal.

In this dance, the student pays attention to the moment that an imagined position of his or her complete body bubbles up into consciousness, at which point the student attempts to physically fulfill the static image (not a movement sequence) as instantaneously as possible with that moment of consciousness. This score is impossible to faithfully realize because body time or reaction time is necessarily slower than brain time (the moment of becoming aware of the mental image), but it does engage students in understanding that waiting attentively for a mental image before one starts to move has compositional interest.

To begin, a dancer imagines a static image of his or her body and attempts to execute that image physically. Students can at first work all at once and later in pairs with one partner observing the other before switching roles. The student might find it helpful to imagine a sports photo from a newspaper or a dance photo shoot wherein she embodies a single static image captured by the camera. I encourage dancers, in fulfilling the imagined positions, to fulfill a single frame of an image as if cut from a video sequence to avoid fabricating a movement sequence or introducing any embellishments to improve on the initial image. After fulfilling an image, the student waits in that pose for the next image to arise. From this practice, students learn to wait before moving until they have an image or idea, and thereby begin to cultivate an appreciation for clarity of execution and the power of stillness as opposed to ceaseless motion. Habituating oneself to stillness moves the art of improvisation toward a clearer compositional

sensibility. Students come to understand that stillness that at first might feel like *nondoing* is actually a *doing*: stillness as dynamic action.

## THE PRACTICE OF PROBLEM SOLVING

Dance scores with directives or highly determined rules are helpful because they focus the mind on tasks or problem-solving activities that keep the improvising choreographer engaged and leave no time for self-conscious reflections. Students often report that they feel they are thinking too much while they improvise. Of course, not thinking is an unhelpful goal because thinking is what brains do. For many students, thinking is not the problem, as much as engaging in judgmental behaviors in the moment and being anxious about what is to come next. Devising scores that allow students to focus thinking on problem solving (which is essentially the activity of improvising) is another way to keep them in the present and foil planning for the future. The idea here is to occupy the students with a task on which they can focus, leaving little time for self-conscious (and time consuming) reflection.

## Chaos of Intention Score

I often use the Chaos of Intention score from ReWire–Dancing States to help students work at an impossibly fast pace in the liminal space between preconscious and conscious awareness. In this score, students try to quickly switch between initiating micromovements with different body parts in split-second intervals while attempting to use all body parts in random and nonlinear sequences. This score is difficult to achieve because habituated movement sequences and linear (successive) movement patterns usually come to the forefront when one moves quickly.

After students are allowed to work this score in solo mode, students pair up and take turns performing the score for each other. When the observer notices a pattern, such as the knees always being in a bent position, the arms always returning to center with elbows bending before extension, or the torso always bending forward, she interrupts and informs the performer of her observations, and the performer tries again to execute movement that avoids the identified patterns. This score makes for a crazy, quick dance as it only consists of one-second movement choices, but students find it liberating because they are so busy thinking about fulfilling the score that they have no time to prejudge their movements. Chaos of Intention score builds a foundation for the student to become facile at initiating movement in novel and unfamiliar sequences. Students experience the phenomenon of moving without self-conscious thought, sometimes for the first time in their improvisational dance experience. As their partners provide feedback on habituated patterns that they observe, the performers become aware of the deeply ingrained and subconscious patterns (implicit choreography) that they bring to their improvisations. Later the time frame for shifting between body parts can be lengthened into a score called Chaos of Ideas, in

which the student fully executes a movement that might take several seconds but strives to maintain the random or non-linear aspect of the score.

Through the practice of Chaos of Intention and Chaos of Ideas scores, students realize that concentrating on problem solving leaves no time for the unhelpful activities of second-guessing the past, judging in the present, or planning what to do in the future. In the end, students understand that although they must think, they need not think beyond the problem at hand.

## CONCLUSION

The prior dance experiences that students bring to their study of improvisation leave them, although skilled, quite uncomfortable and with no experience in composing improvised movement. The scores presented here develop confident improvisers who can think outside the box, get out of their comfort zone, choreograph in the moment, and focus their attention on dance making instead of being distracted by what others might be thinking about them or what to do next. In my 40 years of studying, developing, and teaching this material, I have found organizing the curricula into the three practices of presence, stillness, and problem solving facilitate the teaching and the learning of spontaneous dance-making practices.

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## APPENDIX

### RESOURCES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IMPROVISATIONAL DANCE MAKING

Of the many valuable books and articles published on improvisational dance, the following are the ones that I find particularly useful. For more information on Deborah Hay's choreographic process, consult her *My body, the Buddhist* (Hay 2000). Melinda Buckwalter's (2010) book *Composing While Dancing: An Improvisers Companion* contains information on the ReWire–Dancing States system and the work of many other dance artists. Other publications articulate recent thinking in spontaneous dance-making practices. Kent De Spain's (2014) *Landscape of the Now: A Topography of Movement Improvisation* illuminates the improvisational practices of masters of the form, and Susan Sgorbati's (2007) *The Emergent Improvisation Project* focuses on ensemble practices. There are many interesting articles in *Contact Quarterly: Dance and Improvisation Journal* (see [www.contactquarterly.com](http://www.contactquarterly.com)).