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## **The Point of Contact**

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses an experimental approach to a three-hour 'lecture' in the year 2 Models and Theories of Performance Practice module of the BA (Hons) in Drama. The students were introduced to Contact Improvisation - a form of improvised movement, which emerged in America in the 1970s - through a tripartite structure of lecture, practical session and reflective, phenomenological writing. A key aim was to encourage students to experience theory and practice as inter-woven and to discover whether this movement form would be regarded as interesting for its own sake and/or transferrable in some way to the students' parallel studies in acting and directing. The session involved a general introduction to phenomenology as the study of experience and to phenomenological writing as a mode of first-person description in which the students were encouraged to attempt to capture in words aspects of their experience of encountering and embodying Contact Improvisation for the first time.

## ***Introduction and Rationale***

I chose the core, year 2 Models and Theories of Performance Practice module for my experimental session; a module that historically divorces 'theory' from 'practice' and which the majority of our practically-minded drama students tend to struggle with and/or disengage from. I wanted to challenge the three-hour theory-oriented, lecture and discussion format by implementing a more fluid tri-partite structure; one that would segue from lecture, to practical experimentation to reflective writing and in doing so embrace and embody different modes of learning and knowing. The content of the session was Contact Improvisation, a form of partnered improvised movement grounded in tactile/kinesthetic sensing that emerged in America in the 1970s and which carries within it socio-political values such as egalitarianism and freedom.<sup>1</sup> Underpinning the tripartition was the desire to discover whether this movement form would be regarded as interesting for its own sake and/or transferrable in some way to the students' parallel studies in acting and directing. I wanted them to appreciate the socio-political dimensions of the form - to broadly understand the climate of 1970s America - but I also needed them to experience the form from inside; to attune to the tactile-kinesthetic exchanges that are at the heart of the doing of it. I wanted to see if the students could make experiential sense of what Steve Paxton - the form's founder - meant when he said that contact improvisers should concentrate on 'the sensational facts' (Paxton quoted in Novack, 1990, p.82).<sup>2</sup> This statement - pointing to both pragmatic and ideological indices - was introduced in the lecture, and I was interested in then discovering whether any of the students would be able to consciously attune to their 'sensational facts' - to the *feeling* of the body as it gave and received weight. The last part of the session was devoted to a period of reflective writing, in order to offer the students a space in which they could write from a place of (tentative) somatic knowing. Could some of them transition from and through bodily/kinesthetic knowing to linguistic knowing, using the written word as the medium to develop further self-awareness?

I felt very relaxed  
Yet physically challenged  
Basically it felt like a good workout  
Year 2 Student

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<sup>1</sup> A typical example of the rhetoric associated with the form is that it has 'everything to do with freedom' (Stark Smith, quoted in Novack, 1990, p.197).

<sup>2</sup> Contact Improvisation is widely credited as having been 'invented' by Steve Paxton in 1972. As part of a residency at Oberlin College in Ohio, America, Paxton did a showing of some work he had been doing in a men's class. The showing was called 'Magnesium' and explored how two bodies could negotiate the sharing of weight around an on-going point of contact.

## ***Theoretical Framework***

In the preceding Introduction, I have deliberately used the term 'knowing' rather than 'knowledge', aligning with Elliot Eisner's discussion in 'Art and Knowledge' when he states that knowing is a verb, whereas knowledge is a noun (Eisner quoted in Knowles and Cole, 2008, p.4). Treating the students' nascent knowing of Contact Improvisation as a verb - active and emergent - chimes with Eisner's perspective that knowing is a process of inquiry that 'always yields tentative conclusions rather than permanently nailed down facts' (Eisner, 2002). There is, in Eisner's ideal educational culture, 'greater focus on becoming than on being' (Eisner, 2002), a paradigm that fits with the actual form of Contact Improvisation itself - a shape-shifting dynamic of continual movement; ever-becoming, never static or fixed. The practical and written components of the session were informed by Eisner's view that more educational importance should be placed 'on exploration than on discovery' and that more value is assigned 'to surprise than to control' (Eisner, 2002). These parts of the experiment also aligned with constructivist theories of education, in which 'students are urged to be actively involved in their own process of learning' and it is understood that 'constructing a meaning is an active and continuous process' (Education Theory/Constructivism and Social Constructivism in the Classroom, n.d.). Phenomenologist Alva Noë metaphorically links philosophy and Contact Improvisation for the same reasons. 'I think of philosophy as a form of Contact Improvisation' he says, 'Philosophy is not about the truth or the discovery, it's about the process...the transformation that happens in you...understanding...knowing your way around' (Noë, 2012).

As part of an ongoing lecture series on the body in contemporary performance, I wanted to begin the experimental session with an initial short lecture, designed to impart key facts about Contact Improvisation's history and socio-political significance and to tie this historicity back to previous lectures in the series. Including a short lecture, inclusive of discussion with the students, is in keeping with Graham Gibbs' still-relevant analysis of the efficacy of lectures, when he states that 'factual mastery' is the only pedagogical objective 'which lectures can achieve as well as other methods' (Gibbs, 1981). The desire to then supplement factual understanding with experiential learning by giving the students the opportunity to learn the practical rudiments of the form, also aligns with Gibbs' view that meaning 'cannot simply be transferred to students' and that 'students make their own meaning' (Gibbs, 1981). Getting the students up on their feet - and literally removing the seating - was designed to assist them in making their own meaning out of the preceding lecture; to transition to a phenomenological focus on experience as a way of knowing. As Gibbs puts it, the 'construction of personal knowledge is a personal activity' (Gibbs, 1981), so it was the doing of Contact Improvisation infused with attentiveness to sensations that was foregrounded in this part of the session. This was also in keeping with much recent scholarship on the practice and teaching of a range of movement forms, such as the educational and therapeutic practice of Contact Unwinding,

in which students are invited 'to feel, acknowledge, and respond to inner and outer sensations' (Rugman in Fraleigh, 2015, p.195).<sup>3</sup>

I was aware of the enormous challenge of the final phenomenological writing part of the experiment. As dance scholar Sondra Fraleigh notes, 'finding the direct and intuitive way to describe movement, affect, and our sensate proximity to others is at first daunting' (Fraleigh, 2015, p.21). As the process of describing one's immediate experience requires the student 'to voice what is not initially discursive, but kinesthetic in nature' (Fraleigh, 2015, p.21), I needed some clear and succinct points of departure. I was influenced by phenomenologist Susan Kozel's approach to performing phenomenology, so adapted her method of 'perceptually oriented questions' (Kozel, 2007, p.49) in order to give the students a context for their writing. Kozel's model asks 'wide-angle' and 'fine-grained' questions - such as 'How do we experience the world' and 'What do you hear right now?' - and gives sample responses - such as 'We experience the world through our bodies' and 'No physical sense is isolated from the others' (Kozel, 2007, pp.49-50) - so it functioned as a useful template to adapt to questions geared towards the specific context of my session.

The reflective part of the experiment aligns with the pedagogical approaches of other teacher/scholars who attempt to illustrate how language and movement can 'come together to express consciousness' (Fraleigh, 2000, p.56). Fraleigh frequently incorporates the voices of her students into her classroom work, asking them 'to describe their experience in writing - quickly and intuitively - not listening to their internal critics' (Fraleigh, 2000, p.56). She outlines the descriptive process of phenomenology as 'grounded in experience' and requiring 'reflection, or a looking back on the experience to bring it to language' (Fraleigh, 1991, p.12). Similarly, dance scholar Sabine Sörgel comments that while the focus in phenomenology is 'on experience and movement, language is still a powerful tool to communicate and share our felt experiences with other people' (Sörgel, 2015, p.11).

Fraleigh also makes explicit that as phenomenology 'has the task of studying embodied experience' the first person voice enters into the work (Fraleigh, 2000, p.56). In my experiment, the students were thus given 'permission' to use the first-person perspective, a complete contrast to the disembodied third person voice they are used to. A collation of different first-person writings might then offer me a range of perspectives on the phenomena of a first encounter with Contact Improvisation, different re-creations in words of different livings of the experience.

The period of reflection also included a more speculative piece of writing, in which the students were asked to note down some initial ideas on how they might transfer what they learnt in the session to their work as actors and directors on other modules. This was to enable me to gauge whether, and how, this movement form might chime with their immediate drama studies. Actor trainer David Zinder notes that the form 'is one of the best ways...for actors to keep up improvisation/creative skills' and that the form 'is a *must* for anyone interested in any aspect of the physical approach to theater' (Zinder,

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<sup>3</sup> Contact Unwinding is a parallel form that differs in the fact that the partners take different roles, one being a guide to the other.

2002, p.95, original italics). The more recent *Actor Movement: Expression of the Physical Being* (Ewan and Green, 2015) outlines some of the ways in which Contact Improvisation fosters 'freedom through movement' and confidence for the aspiring drama student (Ewan and Green, 2015, p.24). The reflexive writing component of my experiment would hopefully add to this sparse literature the students' own views on how Contact Improvisation might be able to be applied to aspects of their acting and directing.

### ***The Experiment***

The session began with a broad outline of what I called the 'Decade of Invention' in America, as students were reminded of Disco, *Star Wars*, the first *Earth Day*, 'Roe v Wade', Watergate and the arrival of Apple (not 'Orange', as one student called out in response to a question about a fruit invention that would immeasurably change the landscape of our working and personal lives). I wanted to establish a link between the desire for social change and questioning of the ideological principles that ruled over social, political and artistic fields that was characteristic of 1970s (and 1960s) American society and the invention of a form of movement that adheres to philosophies of socio-sexual equality and challenges stereotypical behavioural norms, such as male aggression and female frailty. Contact Improvisation was thus introduced as carrying particular socio-political values; this understanding reinforced by showing a clip of a typical 'jam' which the students were asked to analyse in terms of markers such as what the participants were wearing and the ways in which they were moving and interacting.<sup>4</sup> Having established the socially informed ideology of the form and given the students a glimpse of what it looks like, I spent a short amount of time detailing some of the ways in which Contact Improvisation can be seen to be relevant to acting and directing. This was a conceptual leap from understanding the form in and through its original social context to seeing potential significances now, within the context of a contemporary drama degree.

Looking back at this part of the experiment, I feel that this section wasn't particularly necessary. The students were interested in the form for its own sake and keen to try it out, so finding concrete links with their other subjects was either irrelevant or something that would occur through their practical experience. The students would construct their opinions on this aspect 'through a process of active enquiry' (Education Theory/Constructivism and Social Constructivism in the Classroom, n.d.). When reading the written reflections at the end of the session, it was also interesting to see that some students envisaged applying the form to their other subjects in ways that I had not outlined earlier; they found their own, unique applications. This was a surprising discovery but one that reminded me that I didn't need to supply a list of standardized ways in which Contact Improvisation is transferrable and relevant to the study of drama. Each student would go on to 'base their

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<sup>4</sup> The Contact Improvisation 'Jam' entails the coming together of a local group of dancers in order to practise and explore the form. A Jam may last a few hours or stretch into days.

learning on the understanding and meaning personal to them' (Education Theory/Constructivism and Social Constructivism in the Classroom, n.d.).

From a directing standpoint, I find the idea of experimenting with CI during my rehearsals interesting. I would be intrigued to find out whether it would open up my actors' physicality and make them more fluid (especially in their interactions with the other actors) as I suspect.

Year 2 Student

Contact Improvisation seems incredibly useful for actor training. It would allow myself and whomever I was acting alongside to explore ways of portraying character relations and emotions. For example, it could help find ways of fighting for an angry scene.

Year 2 Student

After the short lecture, the session segued into practice; the transition marked by a ten-minute spatial transformation, in which the seating was literally removed and the space re-demarcated as a practice-oriented studio. The students were also asked to change into clothes suitable for moving, including removing shoes and socks so that, through the feet up, they were enabled to move 'into the sensory world of the body' (Tufnell and Crickmay, 2004, p.3). Dance scholar Maxine Sheets-Johnstone notes that when we traverse a ground in shoes, 'we feel it less and know it less than if we walk it with our bare feet' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998, p.340). The ability to 'know' the floor (which in Contact Improvisation is often regarded as a 'partner') and to later interact with a human partner would be greatly enhanced through working in bare feet. The ground or partner then communicates '*directly, personally*' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998, p.340, original italics), connecting to Steve Paxton's directive to concentrate on 'the sensational facts' when exploring the form (Paxton quoted in Novack, 1990, p.82).

I led the students through a warm-up, which began by adopting the idea that the floor is a 'partner' so the students could initially work alone, concentrating on rolling, sliding and pushing movements with the feet before developing into slow falls into the floor and rolls back to standing. Each movement was demonstrated, but once the practical rudiments were learnt, experimentation was encouraged. As a pedagogical approach, this meant that everyone 'understands or has tried the required skill' before experimenting further, and it provided 'a bridge between rote imitation and complete freedom' (Blom and Chaplin, 2000, p.87). Students then transitioned to working with a partner, learning how to give and take weight, slide and fall through a series of simple structures. Again, I physically demonstrated each structure and sequence of movements, this time randomly selecting students to be my partners. I have never physically worked with any of these students, so illustrating the rudiments of working together and finding movement in the flow of weight necessitated that I attend to the 'sensational facts' myself. Further work on resisting or yielding to one's partner was illustrated and

explored before the students were invited to improvise a longer duet, drawing on their understanding of the foundational principles of how movement is generated. A number of clear starting points were offered – e.g. start back to back, or start with A ‘draped’ over B (the dynamic quality of ‘draping’ being core to the form) and then the movement that ensued was determined by each pairing, ‘the partners’ sensitivity to shifts of weight, leanings, lines of direction, pull, flow.’ (Blom and Chaplin, 2000, p.87).

At this point in the session, I drew on educationalist Viola Spolin’s technique of ‘sidecoaching’, in which I called out ‘just that word, that phrase, or that sentence’ that would keep the students ‘on focus’ (Spolin, 1986, p.5). Phrases or questions were designed to encourage the students to attune to their ‘sensational facts’ as they improvised (also making an explicit connection between the lecture and practical component of the session). Questions such as ‘where do your feet touch the ground?’ and ‘which parts of you feel soft or fluid, which hard or dense?’ and statements such as ‘notice your breathing pattern’, ‘sense your weight’ and ‘let your weight settle and accept support’, functioned as prompts for the students to consciously focus attention on the stirrings of somatic, bodily knowing. At times I asked the students to deliberately slow down. Rugman notes that a radical shift in speed ‘can help concentrate the attention even more and invites participants to really engage with their kinesthetic sensitivity’ (Rugman in Fraleigh, 2015, p.201).

Encouraging the students to move with this kind of conscious attention to the subtleties of what Fraleigh calls ‘our body-self’ (Fraleigh, 2000, p.57) laid the foundations for the reflective writing that was to follow, as the students were beginning to access the phenomenal domain, engaging with their senses and registering the immediate moment of experience. Rugman talks of this kind of consciousness allowing students ‘to be an active participant in the process rather than passive recipient’ and acknowledging ‘the authority of the body as a thinking, feeling unit in this process’ (Rugman in Fraleigh, 2015, p. 207). As a form of learning, it is an active process that ‘depends on the students taking responsibility to learn’ (Education Theory/Constructivism and Social Constructivism in the Classroom, n.d.). The improvised duets went on for ten to fifteen minutes, the majority of students visibly engaged, curious, often laughing as they explored and re-explored permutations of movement emerging from a shifting point of contact.

The final part of the session involved a general introduction to phenomenology as the study of experience and phenomenological writing as a way to further investigate and capture something of the experience of doing Contact Improvisation. Rugman notes that journal writing ‘allows the learning that is taking place to be consolidated even further’ (Rugman in Fraleigh, 2015, p.207) but as this mode of self-enquiry was a radical new step for the students, I sensed some uncertainty at the beginning of the writing period. I gave the students a sample piece of phenomenological writing, pointing out the use of the first person and descriptive phrases like ‘loosen and feel my body’ and ‘allows a softening and spreading out’ (Tufnell and Crickmay, 2004, p.16) so that they could get a taste of the ways in which words can capture aspects of experience.<sup>5</sup> I then asked them to write or record their answers to

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<sup>5</sup> The full piece of writing is: ‘As I begin to loosen and feel my body, I discover a sense of its weight, mass, and fullness, which in turn opens me more into the present



a series of questions (see Appendix A) and followed that up with a more speculative piece of writing in response to the question of how they might apply what they learnt of Contact Improvisation to their concurrent studies in acting or directing. The students were invited to share their responses with me, either anonymously or attributed, by giving me their hand-written sheets or e-mailing them through later. Quite a small percentage of students gave or sent me their responses, leading me to surmise that the majority struggled with this aspect of the experiment, unable - rather than I think unwilling - to make a smooth transition from bodily to linguistic knowing.

Calm - a bodily calm rather than my mind, I felt I had to be quite focused mentally

Heavy - I was surprised at how much weight my body could give over to my partner

Relaxed, open, spacious, released

Flowing & fluid - when we came to improvise the duet, I was surprised and impressed by how much myself and my partner flowed into and around each other

Year 2 Student

## **Conclusion**

The tripartite structure is one I would like to pursue further, as there were clearly useful links between aspects of the lecture - most noticeably viewing and discussing the footage of a sample jam - and the students' own practical experiments. There was a palpable sense of play, experimentation and enjoyment in the practical work, with a few students choosing to work in quite a dynamic register in following momentum and falling. Given that these students had never encountered Contact Improvisation before, nor had they had any significant grounding in physical training or exposure to touch as a medium of learning, I was delighted by their pragmatic and attitudinal approaches.

Whilst the phenomenological writings have given me some useful insight into some students' responses to their encounter with Contact Improvisation, I didn't receive back as many as I would have liked to form a more comprehensive picture of the impact of the experiment. All the students were clearly writing in the last part of the session, so I attribute the paucity of responses actually passed onto me as a sign of un-sureness about the validity of what they had written or the stifling presence of the 'internal critics' that Fraleigh acknowledges might be at play in this kind of writing (Fraleigh,

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moment. As each part of the body finds a sense of its own particular weight, it lets go of the parts around it, and this allows a softening and spreading out – weight of the hand giving way and letting go of neck; weight of pelvis letting go of legs; shoulders falling from ribcage and spine; hands falling from wrists. What may have felt inert or dense begins to flow and move, and paradoxically to lighten. And as we find our own living, breathing weight, we also discover our own rhythm and pace' (Tufnell and Crickmay, 2004, p.16).

2000, p.56). I stressed that phenomenological writing validates subjective experience - and thus there were no 'correct' answers to the questions - but I suspect that many students struggled to articulate the learning that had so clearly taken place in ways that they felt comfortable sharing. Those samples peppered throughout this paper, however, demonstrate a tangible sense of nascent bodily knowing and the ability to begin to look back on experience and make sense of it by bringing it to language.

There is clearly scope to develop the efficacy of the process of self-reflection. Next time I would ask participants to 'share a brief verbal exchange immediately after the activity' in order to 'establish the learning that has taken place' (Rugman in Fraleigh, 2015, p.206). The opportunity to verbalize the experience - speaking what they felt or what they noticed - as well as listen to others' experiences, may then lay the foundations for more confident written reflections, ones that they see as part of their 'temporary experimental accomplishments, tentative resting places subject to further change', rather than cast-iron, 'correct' responses to tasks (Eisner, 2002).

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## **Appendix A**

### **Perceptually oriented questions**

Did moving slowly and gently make you feel physically relaxed or tense?

Did you notice any physical resistance to giving or taking weight?

How did that resistance manifest in your body?

Were you aware of your breath as you were doing Contact Improvisation?

Were you holding your breath?

Did you notice the temperature in the studio?

Write down any of these sensations that applied to you as you were doing CI:

Tense, tight, shaky, wobbly, dizzy, breathless, heavy, cold, constricted, hot, calm, energized, warm, cool, relaxed, open, light, spacious, Released, expanded, expansive, flowing, floating, fluid, tingling, queasy.

Any others?