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Improvisation in dance education: teacher views

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In this paper, a qualitative study of teacher views on improvisation practices in dance education is reported. Eleven professional dance teachers with a wide experience in using improvisation in dance teaching participated in the study answering to a semi-structured interview, which included various questions about aspects of improvisation in dance education such as meanings, motor and mental abilities involved, basic exercises, most frequently used ideas for teaching and organisation of a typical lesson. A qualitative analysis was performed using an inductive method, which provided evidence of various teaching processes during dance improvisation and the techniques employed by teachers in dance education. Teachers demonstrated awareness about the potentialities of improvisation in dance education as well as skills and competences developed during the educational activities. A learner-centred approach in dance improvisation teaching and the relationship between motor, cognitive and emotive domains were evident. The results are discussed in relation to the use of improvisation in dance education.

Keywords: dance education; improvisation; teaching strategies; learner-centred approach

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in the literature on the use of improvisation in teaching and learning (Barbour 2011; Cooper Albright and Gere 2003; Kaltenbrunner 1998; Minton 1997) and improvisation could be considered an established technique in dance education (Blom and Chaplin 1988). There is evidence of improvisation applications in a wide spectrum of dance education contexts from children to adults, from amateurs to professionals as well as for people with disabilities. Several authors presented how they used improvisation in dance education, based on their own experiences. Lord (2001, 19–20) noted that ‘most of the literature dealing with the teaching of improvisation does not emerge from systematic studies [...] While personal or professional experience certainly represents a legitimate source of knowledge for guiding one’s teaching practice, it is not research’. The current research contributes to fill this gap by adopting a qualitative analysis method of teacher views on improvisation in dance education, summarising the perspectives of eleven experienced dance teachers.

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Current research aims

The current research focuses on the teacher perspective on improvisation in dance education. The purpose of this study is to establish the goals and the teaching modalities used by teachers while practising improvisation in dance education, covering most of the areas that are typically dealt with in a general class on improvisation. Although there are several advanced techniques that teachers and improvisers use, such as contact improvisation, creating an improvised dance score and other types of tuning exercises, the aim of the current research is to cover the techniques used most often by teachers and beginning students. Based on the findings of prior literature on dance improvisation (Lord 2001), my aim is to investigate the organisation of a typical lesson focusing on the general motor and mental abilities involved, the basic exercises, the most frequently used ideas for dance improvisation teaching and also revealing teacher views of these aspects. The purpose of this paper is to define why it is important to use improvisation in dance education and what the benefits are, for students practising dance improvisation as well as considering aspects such as how a teacher organises a lesson in dance improvisation and how dance improvisation could be taught. These are important issues for developing a model of reflective teaching for dance education. The process of becoming critically reflective about teaching is important for enhancing the quality of teaching (Biasutti 2010, 2012; Biasutti and EL-Deghaidy 2012). Reflecting on the implicit level of improvisation, which involves instinct and other inner states, is relevant to understand the underlying processes and to think over teaching strategies for professional dance teachers. As a result of this research, it is my goal to develop an educational approach based on the development of processes rather than products. Reflecting on the processes of teaching and learning improvisation involves the development of meta-cognitive strategies which are crucial for effective teaching.

Literature review

There is a growing interest in research that considers how improvisation is used in dance education (Lord 2001), although there is relatively little research comparing different teacher opinions. Prior research in this area has focused on how improvisation facilitates the expression of creativity in primary school children (Chappell 2007), the improvisational teaching practice in secondary school (Lord 2001) and improvisation applied as a choreographic method (Kloppenbergh 2010; Lavender and Predock-Linnell 2001). Connell (2009) conducted a survey involving 198 English dance practitioners about teacher beliefs, understanding and attitudes towards dance teaching. Findings indicate that the majority of practitioners associate dance education with creativity, which is considered an important attribute to express oneself through dance. In addition, participants noted that a method based on creativity can develop confidence during a performance with others, and offer opportunities for understanding successful teaching strategies and learning achievements. Chappell (2007) studied the conceptions of and approaches to creativity of three dance teachers in dance education at the primary school level. The close observation of the methods used by the dance teachers suggests that they encourage motivation, tenacity, curiosity towards the unusual and confidence. Lord (2001) conducted an interpretive study in which he described two teaching practices of dance improvisation as they naturally occurred. The context was within a secondary school setting and the researcher found the following six learning goals: (1) generate movement

spontaneously; (2) concentrate; (3) be physically alert; (4) take responsibility for decision making; (5) relate to one another while moving; and (6) observe movement. Also the following five teaching strategies to foster student's ability to generate movement spontaneously were identified: (1) setting up the situation; (2) presenting the task; (3) providing the transition to execution; (4) guiding the task execution; and (5) revisiting the situation. Doughty et al. (2008) developed projects to help students understand the processes activated during movement improvisation and to develop student skill to verbalise their decision-making processes. Morgenroth (1987), in a practical book, proposed several exercises for developing dance improvisation, sorted in the following categories: preliminaries, space, time and movement intentions. Blom and Chaplin (1988) wrote a comprehensive manual providing the foundations and many applied situations for developing improvisation in dance education.

Improvisation is widely used to experience new ideas in the process of composing a new choreography (Smith-Autard 2010) and it is considered a creative method by many contemporary choreographers (Kloppenbergh 2010; Lavender and Predock-Linnell 2001). Improvisation exercises are very common in the practice of teaching and learning choreography, and they are a way to allow students to explore movements and to find material that they will later consider for developing choreography. Kloppenbergh (2010) noted that improvisation could impact choreographic choice, performance quality and audience understanding. Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001, 195) believe that 'students learn to become choreographers through the development of critical consciousness; the ability to describe, analyse, interpret, evaluate, and imagine/implement revisions to their own and others' dances [...] Criticism is the bridge between the activities of improvisation and choreography'.

Based on creative cognitive theories, Lavender (2009) proposed the Improvisation, Development, Evaluation and Assimilation model, which could be considered a map of the operations to create choreography. It is not a rigid model and it fits the user's needs. The first phase involves the improvisation of the choreographer to explore new movements to develop self-awareness, body control, knowledge of how the body operates and a different quality of movement. The development (second phase) involves a deepening of the ideas that emerge during improvisation. The third phase is characterised by an evaluation of the movement material obtained through the previous stages. The assimilation stage describes the process in which the choreographer composes the modules of improvisation to create choreography.

In the reviewed literature, several aspects of the use of improvisation in dance education were reported. However, it is quite difficult to compare the results since different aims and methods were used. Most of the papers reported the facts as they were experienced by teachers without considering a systematic method. The prior research highlights that improvisation strategies were considered mainly in case studies or reported by individual teachers (Lord 2001), and aspects such as the relationship between improvisation and choreography were considered (Kloppenbergh 2010; Lavender and Predock-Linnell 2001). Improvisation research usually involved qualitative methodologies in educational settings (Lord 2001) and there is relatively little research conducted that compares and summarises different teacher opinions. In contrast, the current research explores teacher perspectives about improvisation in dance education which are surveyed through interviews with eleven professional dance teachers.

Method

In the current research, a qualitative approach was followed to collect essential aspects from the teacher perspective and to understand teaching processes. It involved broadly stated questions about experiences in dance improvisation teaching. An interview was used to collect data of the experiences and concepts about dance improvisation teaching. This method provides a rich and descriptive data-set to understand teacher experiences and attitudes. The so-called grounded theory was used as a theoretical background for data analysis. The grounded theory refers to the production of a theory which is inductively developed through data analysis. I use the term 'grounded theory' in agreement with Bannan (2004, 32) who considers it

in reference to theory that was generated by close inspection and analysis of qualitative data, the supposed freedoms afforded to a researcher being centred on the flexibility to develop categories from collected data, rather than fitting data to pre-designed categories [...]

The interviews of the current research were analysed with the constant comparative method (CCM), a qualitative approach based on the grounded theory. CCM could be defined as a method for analysing qualitative data to produce a grounded theory that demonstrates how some aspects of the social environment work. In the CCM, the categories emerge from the data by the use of an inductive analysis rather than coding the data according to pre-arranged categories (Charmaz and Henwood 2008). The following main five steps of the CCM were considered: immersion, categorisation, phenomenological reduction, triangulation and interpretation which will be explained in detail later.

Teacher profile

Eleven Italian professional and experienced dance teachers participated in the study. The teachers were recruited because of their wide experience in using improvisation as a dance teaching technique. All participants were dance teachers in private institutions or in dance academies with a national career as a dance teacher. Some of them were involved in teaching master classes, and had a wide range of experience in teaching dance improvisation. All the teachers had formal training in various kinds of dance styles such as ballet, jazz or contemporary dance and they were teaching and practising mainly contemporary dance. Teacher backgrounds were varied including master classes in foreign countries on several techniques. Teacher's experience in dance education ranged from 10 to 28 years. Teacher ages ranged from 31 to 55 and the majority were female ($M=1$, $F=10$).

Interview

The interview was semi-structured (Mason 2002) and included questions about various aspects of improvisation use in dance education. The questions are drawn on the improvisation literature in dance education (Lord 2001). The first interview (1) question dealt with the meaning of dance improvisation, its context and collecting personal views of what teachers considered dance improvisation. The following two questions (2 and 3) are focused on the motor and mental abilities in dance improvisation, trying to identify the underlying processes involved. Two specific questions (4 and 5) addressed the basic exercises for dance improvisation teaching

asking teachers to report all activities, ideas and stimuli that they develop during improvisation teaching. In the next questions (6 and 7), the educational paths and how dance improvisation could be taught are considered, including aspects such as approach and method. The last question (8) is focused on the lesson organisation, considering the sequence of activities involved in dance improvisation teaching. Also, aspects such as why it is important to use improvisation in dance education and the benefits for students in practising dance improvisation or situations in which it is not recommended to use improvisation were considered. The questions list is reported in Appendix.

Procedure

Teachers were informed that the interview would remain anonymous and were encouraged to give accurate answers. Teachers were informed that the answers were used for research purposes only. The interviews were carried out individually and lasted 40–90 min. The interviews were recorded on a MP3 audio recorder and transcribed verbatim. The teachers had the opportunity to review the transcripts to ensure accuracy of their expressed perspectives.

Description of the interviews

Before analysing and interpreting the data, it is useful to describe the collected data. Teachers provided a rich scenario about their use of improvisation in dance education. The data suggest that teachers use improvisation in several moments of their dance teaching, including during the warm-up, the core of the lesson and performance opportunities which are offered sometimes at the end of the class. The style of reporting is informal and colloquial, and there is a personal way of reporting. All the questions are read out at the beginning of the interview to the teachers to clarify the context and the sequence of questions where needed. In order to give a general idea of the data, a sampling of the participant responses prior to analysis is reported below for the first question: What do you mean by dance improvisation?

It is quite difficult to answer to this question since several meanings and actions could be connected to improvisation depending on the situation. When you are directly involved as a performer you can consider improvisation as an opportunity to experiment something which is new, creative, which does not follow predetermined movements. For me, improvisation is to get out of my plans and to be open to all. To go beyond, to conflict with those obvious things. Finding something you're still surprised, that is unknown. During improvisation you do not follow preconceived movements or framework and you are free to be guided by your instinct, by your intuitions. For me, it's the deep listening to your inner instinct, it is something that came spontaneously from you as a person. It is exploring a part of yourselves, a part that you are unaware of. For me, improvisation is to feel the pleasure of risk taking, of surprise, of freedom, of awareness in leaving the space–time dimension, to feel you are on the right side and on the true side. I was experimenting with improvisation in several contexts and situations. For me, it depends also why you are doing the improvisation, because sometimes you do an improvisation with the aim of collecting material and then configure and use it in a more defined situation. Other times you are improvising during a performance in front of an audience and in this case the aims are different.

Analysis

CCM, an inductive method based on the grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998), was employed to analyse and categorise the answers. This grounded theory

approach was adopted to analyse the responses around some specific established questions within the categories implied by the questionnaire used. The following five phases of CCM were adopted: (1) immersion, in which all the discernible answers are recognised, (2) categorisation, in which subcategories and categories appear from the discernible different answers, (3) phenomenological reduction, in which themes come out from the categories, (4) triangulation, in which supplementary elements were used for increasing the reliability of the study, and (5) interpretation, in which a complete explanation of outcomes is carried out in connection to previous research and/or models. This method of analysis has been fruitfully adopted in earlier research examining online participant perspectives (Biasutti 2011) and musical communication (Seddon and Biasutti 2009a, 2009b). For further clarification, a diagram of the first three steps of data analysis is reported in Figure 1.

In the immersion phase, the researcher was involved in reading many times through the interview transcriptions in order to acquire a high degree of familiarity with the material. In this phase, the discernibly different answers were identified.

In the categorisation phase, similar behaviours were grouped and subcategories emerged from the discernibly different answers. Subcategories were consequently sorted and the categories emerged.

In the phenomenological reduction phase, five themes were formed out of the categories which were subsequently identified: definitions, skills, lesson implementation, techniques and advantages/disadvantages.

In the triangulation phase, an independent researcher checked the proposed themes, the categories and the subcategories in order to provide validity of the analysis. The original researcher and the independent researcher discussed any possible disagreements relating to the coding. Changes to the original coding were made accordingly.

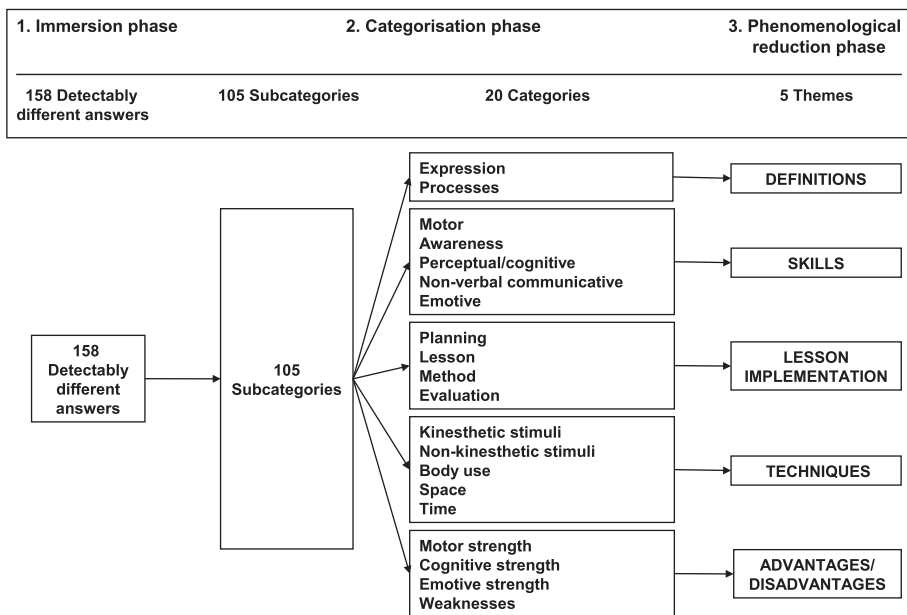


Figure 1. Three phases of the analysis of interview data.

Results

CCM answers analysis is described below for each of the following themes: definitions, skills, lesson implementation, techniques and advantages/disadvantages.

Definitions

Several meanings were provided by the teachers (the complete list of categories and subcategories are reported in Table 1). The results are described considering the following categories: expression and processes.

Expression

The most common definition reported by teachers was a description of dance improvisation as a spontaneous, creative and non-planned movement characterised by the expression of emotions and body feelings. ‘Dance improvisation brings up in the performer a full range of emotion and expression through movement’, ‘Improvisation is the ability to divest yourself of a dress, the technique, and follow your body sensations, atmospheres, sound, air, light, everything that surrounds you. This is very difficult’, ‘It’s the deep listening to your inner instinct’, ‘It is collapsing into yourself’. These quotes point out that teachers expressed definitions which refer to an interior state of feelings that they felt free to follow, uninfluenced by technique constraints. Improvisation was considered a natural way of dancing and to express yourself by activating an authentic inner communication. ‘During improvisation the dancer reveals his personality, his thoughts, his soul’, ‘It is exploring a part of yourselves, a part that you are unaware of’, ‘You should feel free to be yourself and to make something come from your inner state’. These statements point out that dance improvisation was considered a real body language, because of the direct expression of the performer’s inner state; there is a freedom in this process.

‘Improvisation liberates your body and allows you to move in absolute freedom without any constraints’, ‘Freedom! It is an openness to all: the space, what there is in the environment around you, the people, and the objects’, ‘There are dancers who work on styles, like jazz, I would say, picking here and there from a repertoire of gestures, movements, playing in an instant composition, different every time, but it is not our work’, ‘It is developing movements without reference to pre-constructed structures’.

Table 1. Categories and subcategories of the theme ‘definitions’.

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Definitions	Expression	Spontaneous, creative movements Emotions, feelings and personality Authentic body language Exploration of yourself Freedom
	Processes	Personal use of the technique Experimentation with original movements Real time composition Adaptation and interaction Risk taking Detachment of space–time dimension Transformation into movements

These quotes highlight the freedom in improvisation and that preconceived stylistic forms are not to be found in the framework of this process. The focus is on finding a dimension in which performers are able to express themselves.

Processes

Teachers also reported several processes during improvisation, and reference to a personal use of the technique was mentioned.

It is the ability to internalize the technique and to know how to use it personally. It is the ability to build relationships with the world around you. It is the flexibility to use your body conception over time and space. It is the ability to relate yourself to places, if any. It is opening glimpses on the space–time dimension. It is something always present in the body state which is transformed into a gesture. It is the ability to meditate about the action and to transpose it outward.

In this quote, some characteristics of dance improvisation creative processes were reported, based on an introspective ability to look into oneself and to define this state. Also the process of transposing and transforming feelings into body movements was mentioned. Evidence was provided of experimentation processes during improvisation. ‘Improvisation is to get out of my plans and to be open to all. To go beyond, to conflict with those obvious things. Finding something that surprises, something that is unknown’, ‘It is the ability to investigate your own body, space, relationships with others and the symbolic expressive possibilities of movement’. These statements are about the issue of experimenting and finding original movements during improvisation. Looking at the unknown and searching a personal expressive dimension are the driving forces of this process.

Dance improvisation was defined as a real time composition by teachers. ‘It is the ability to compose instantaneously which is not repeatable, and it evaporates at the same time when it is created’, ‘It happens in a moment, requiring considerable skills in the ability to choose a movement’, ‘It is when the body is faster than the thought and when you do not give yourself the time to decide. Improvisation is the art of tightrope walking’. These quotes underline the dynamic process of dance improvisation: the dancer has to demonstrate the ability to control this continuous process also reacting in real time. This could be very difficult because you have to make decisions instantaneously in relation to the context. ‘It gives you the opportunity to adapt yourself to the environment and to unknown people’. This quote points out that dance improvisation was considered an interactive process in which the movements could be adapted to the situation. Also other processes were reported by teachers. ‘Improvisation is to feel the pleasure of risk taking, of surprise, of freedom, of awareness in leaving the space–time dimension, to feel you are on the right side and on the true side’. This quote draws attention to some important processes such as risk taking, the alteration of space–time perception and the feelings associated with these processes. There is a general sense of satisfaction during improvisation, a feeling that one is doing something right.

Skills

Several skills were mentioned by the teachers (the complete list of categories and sub-categories are reported in Table 2). The results are described considering the following

Table 2. Categories and subcategories of the theme 'skills'.

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Skills	Motor	Work on muscle Articulation Balance Reinforcement Coordination Body and movement control
	Awareness	Parts of the body Yourself Proprioceptive dimension Control of energy Speed Physical effort Expressive dimension
	Perceptual/cognitive	Overall stage perception Concentration Feedback Problem solving Divergent thinking Critical thinking Analytical thinking Translate thought into action
	Non-verbal communicative	To listen to the others Relate to the others Relate to space Relate to time
	Emotive	Intrinsic motivation Confidence

categories: motor, awareness, perceptual/cognitive, non-verbal communicative and emotive.

Motor

With regard to motor skills, teachers mentioned aiming for fostering articulation, balance and coordination. 'You develop the basic body movements and posture, and you have the feeling of complete body use'. Reinforcement and body development were also mentioned, but one of the most important aspects was movement control. 'While working, you focus on coordination and motor skills', '[...] Putting the body in a situation of harmony, finding the best way to perform a technique, to improve the movement quality and control'. A number of teacher responses stress the importance of motor development.

Awareness

In connection with motor skills, the development of awareness skills was mentioned as part of the educational practice. 'You start by working on listening, on movement awareness, on finding yourself in your body, on your movement. So, doing things that develop your sense of awareness'. This statement points out that awareness development is considered an integral part of dance improvisation education and that it is a basic process. The awareness development concerns body parts, energy

control, speed and physical effort. The awareness development of the proprioceptive dimension and of the self was also mentioned, which includes the emotive domain and the personal symbolic level. The development of awareness skills is strictly connected with the cognitive domain.

Perceptual/cognitive

Teachers mentioned several perceptual and cognitive competences to be developed during dance improvisation, such as an overall perception of what is happening on stage and concentration. 'It is a matter of concentration: you have to focus on the event, being open to what is happening'. This statement underlines that dance improvisation develops concentration since dancers have to use all their attentional resource to be focused on the situation for reacting in real time. Improvisation develops also other processes such as feedback, problem solving and divergent thinking. 'Dance improvisation involves the development of the ability to find interactively unusual solutions following stimuli or sudden changes. Dancers are stimulated to react immediately and to find solutions, which are sudden divergent solutions'. This quote points out that dance improvisation stimulates dancers to react to unexpected events and to solve unpredicted situations. 'Improvisation develops decision making processes in an instinctive way [...] You are trained to a faster thought mode'. This quote provides evidence that the activation of decision-making processes is also part of the improvisation work and that one is educated to take decisions in real time. Another general cognitive competence is learning to translate one's thoughts into action, which is not easy. It is a complex process that involves the transposition from one medium to another as thoughts have to be transformed into action. Other reported skills were reflection as well as the development of analytical and critical thinking.

Non-verbal communicative

With regard to the development of non-verbal communication, several abilities such as listening to the others, relate to the others, space and time were considered important by teachers.

Improvisation develops the search for an organic unity, a harmony, a breathing together, which are very important aspects in improvisation because you often are improvising with others and not alone, so the next step is just to work with others. In this context there has to be a listening to what is happening in the space around you, even though you cannot see everything. Specifically, with another person it is very important to perceive the other, being receptive to information that can be felt within the space.

These quotes draw attention to the importance of establishing a relationship with the other performers and to interact with them. During improvisation, dancers understand each other's intentions and emotions. Group work was considered valuable as well as the ability to activate synergies for reaching harmony. It is a more sophisticated and deeper form of communication than verbal communication because the product is intangible, not real. The communication process is non-verbal and the relationships to the others are developed with the ability to draw information from the context. It is a complex process based on non-verbal communication and it

would be interesting to further research what strategies and techniques would suit best.

Emotive

With regard to the development of emotive skills, intrinsic motivation and confidence were considered by teachers: ‘Movement is originated by a strong internal motivation [...]’, ‘It is the pleasure and enjoyment for the action’, ‘The imaginary becomes a strong motivation which is then translated into motion [...]’, ‘Your motivation is fostered by sharing the creation of what is happening’. These statements point out that there are several stimuli that could foster motivation such as pleasure, the translation of inner states and sharing creative processes. Also confidence building was mentioned by teachers.

‘The experimentation helps you acquire self-confidence, in your actions, the space, your presence on stage’, ‘[...] The choreographer sees a gesture that is fine at that time for the performance and it is something that you have produced and not a movement you must do. So, the dancer then may feel recognition, acquiring confidence from its creation’.

These statements underline that improvisation processes stimulate the development of confidence for several aspects of the performance variables.

Lesson implementation

Several lesson implementation aspects were provided by the teachers (the complete list of categories and subcategories are reported in Table 3). The results are described considering the following categories: planning, lesson, method and evaluation.

Table 3. Categories and subcategories of the theme ‘lesson implementation’.

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Lesson implementation	Planning	To set objectives
		To define the activity
		To use different techniques
		To use tools or objects
	Lesson	To create a friendly and relaxed environment
		To express freedom without embarrassment
		Warm-up
		To arrive gradually at the improvisation
		To communicate your aims
		To give and explain the tasks
		To give one instruction at a time
	Method	Learner-centred approach
		Learning dance while dancing (learning by doing)
		Active learning
		To involve the participants
		To guide the participants
Evaluation	The teacher as a facilitator	
	Cooperative learning	
	Peer observation	
	Self-evaluation strategies	
	Verbalisation	

Planning

In the process of lesson planning, several aspects were mentioned and teachers reported that improvisation is a goal-oriented activity.

You can not improvise doing whatever you want such as to fiddle around. There must be some indications from the person who is leading the session, but also a preparation from a motor point of view, in the sense of being able to control the movement and moving with the others. That's the difficult thing. To jump into a group and move around randomly is something all of us can do. Instead, improvisation is an education with clear goals of how to exploit the possibilities of your body, the possibilities of movement that your body can do with the others.

This quote highlights the importance of setting goals and defining precise activities for exploring the body movement possibilities and that also the context is important as the individual improvisation movements have to be coordinated with the others.

Setting clear goals helps identifying the target purposes and verifying them at the end of the activities. To define the activity context is another crucial point. 'There must be some indications by the session leader', 'It is important to have precise tasks', 'You have to set rules at the beginning and then gradually increase the degree of freedom', 'Then there is always a task. There are always ideas and stimulations [...]'. These statements point out that task definition is important for structuring the improvisation, as is the use of different techniques for giving variability to the lesson.

Lesson

With regard to the lesson, several conditions were mentioned. First of all, the teacher has to create a friendly and relaxed environment in which learners can express themselves without embarrassment. With regard to warm-up, gradually introducing elements of improvisation, teachers affirmed: 'You start from exploring and feeling the body and small exercises and exercises on the spine, joints exercises, exercises on opening/closing, lengthening and shortening, near and far'; 'The first lesson part is warm-up, then there are various exercises followed by technique exercises and then the improvisation'. These statements underline the lesson structure and the development of the activities. The participants are aware that structuring the lesson is very important and in some cases improvisation was set in a specific moment of the lesson. 'I prefer to propose the improvisation activity before the last part of the lesson (choreography development)'. Several other aspects came up for successfully conducting the lesson: clearly explain the tasks, which is relevant for addressing specific actions and to avoid dispersion, and give one instruction at a time, which helps to prevent confusion.

Method

With regard to the method, the teachers proposed the idea that dance improvisation supports practical learning. This idea could be considered under a constructivist approach based on the process of obtaining meaning from direct experience. Dance improvisation can stimulate learning while dancing, which is a form of learning by doing: the dancer makes discoveries and experiments directly, instead of dealing with theory. Dance improvisation could be considered a suitable method for applying what could be called the *learner-centred approach* in dance education.

The main goal of the learner-centred methodology is to shape learning as far as possible from the students' individual needs. The accent is towards the learner rather than the instructor. The teacher creates ways for developing learning processes and defines appropriate teaching strategies to design learning activities. This involved changes to the teaching role from deliverer of knowledge to learning facilitator. The facilitator helps the learner to get to his/her own understanding of the activity rather than imposing actions and movements to the students. Dance improvisation is also connected with active learning which involves a direct participation of the students and the ability to reflect on the experience. Also the reference to cooperative learning activities and working in pairs and subgroups were mentioned.

Evaluation

With regard to evaluation, teachers reported that assessment is a very important aspect of the didactic activities and there have to be specific moments for evaluating. Several techniques were reported by teachers such as the use of peer observation for contrasting opinions and sharing ideas.

It is important between colleagues to observe what is being done on stage [...] At the end you have feedback of what has been done, what has been heard. It is useful to develop awareness of what you are doing.

This quote highlights that peer observation helps to focus on specific aspects of improvisation and to develop cooperation between dancers. Verbalising was also mentioned for clarifying why a dancer was acting in a particular way, and reflecting about the actions. The activation of self-evaluation strategies was also mentioned.

Techniques

Several exercises and techniques were mentioned (the complete list of the categories and subcategories are reported in Table 4). The results are described considering the following categories: kinesthetic stimuli, non-kinesthetic stimuli, body use, space and time.

Kinesthetic stimuli

With regard to the improvisation stimuli, teachers considered several activities starting from kinesthetic stimuli and reported on the development of spontaneous movements starting from a given task, or a movement exploration within a task organised around specific movements. These stimuli have a kinesthetic nature. In our case, there is a direct link between the starting ideas and the improvisation development. Movement games as well as the use of everyday life gestures were mentioned, to connect the improvisation activities to real life events.

Non-kinesthetic stimuli

With regard to the improvisation applications, teachers considered also a wide spectrum of activities with non-kinesthetic stimuli and objects. 'I use an image that I saw and I start from it to improvise, such as a noise that I hear or just images, music, sounds, thoughts and also texts', 'You are inspired by your imagination or by a poem, a picture, a mind state', [...] or exercises for couples in which there

Table 4. Categories and subcategories of the theme ‘techniques’.

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Techniques	Kinesthetic stimuli	Movement games
		Gestures of everyday life
		A choreographic phrase
		The movements of the others
	Non-kinesthetic stimuli	A word or a text
		An idea or a thought
		An image
		A sound event
		A voice
		A smell or taste
		A feeling or emotion
		With objects
Body use	Gaze and eye contact	
	To close your eyes	
	To use only one part of the body	
	Contact between two or more participants	
	Energy	
Space	Movement quality	
	Space	
	Angles	
	Levels	
Time	To display a form	
	Contact with a surface, the ground and gravity	
	Duration	
	Tempo	
	Different rhythms	
	With music	
	Without music	

are different visual images such as a mountain and a cloud, for example one element being more static and the other lighter’. These statements point out that the starting ideas of this category were from other media than movement, such as acoustic (a voice, a sentence or a sound event), visual (a drawing or an image), smell or taste. Also other aspects such as an idea or a thought were mentioned. In this case, it is evident that translation processes from an acoustic or visual medium to a kinesthetic medium are involved. Also improvising from a feeling or an emotion and the use of images such as the five elements, animals, colours, symbols as well as objects such as furniture or clothes were good stimuli for developing improvisation.

Body use

With regard to body use, several body parts were considered. It is important to work with different body parts and to reconnect them in a general plan.

To isolate body parts when you dance is one of the exercises you can do, because it is true that the body is perceived as a whole and it is difficult to separate the various body parts, shifting focus on each body part.

This statement underlines that you can develop a different awareness of your body if you isolate and you work on specific body parts. Use of the eyes is important to

experiment several different expressions and kinds of eye contact as well as when improvising with closed eyes. To improvise with only one body part, e.g. hands or feet, or working on the link between two or more body parts such as head and coccyx is another technique. Body contact was another important variable and the contact could be between different body parts of two or more participants.

Space

Space is another important variable to be used for developing improvisation considering different angles, not only the audience front and space levels (high, medium and lower). To display forms such as lines, circles, curves and straight lines was also mentioned as a technique. '[...] I do tasks such as circle movements, or thinking about your legs as if they were without joints, enter in space, find new ways [...] this is done to find movement quality'. Contact was also mentioned with a surface, the ground or by gravity.

Time

With regard to time, improvisation was reported with different durations, using different rhythms, and following different styles of music with a regular or irregular beat. At the same time teachers reported that music is not always necessary and you can develop improvisation also without music.

Advantages/disadvantages

Several advantages and disadvantages about the use of improvisation were provided by teachers (the complete list of the categories and subcategories are reported in Table 5). The results are described considering the following categories: motor strength, cognitive strength, emotive strength and weaknesses.

Table 5. Categories and subcategories of the theme 'advantages/disadvantages'.

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Advantages/ disadvantages	Motor strength	Improvisation is accessible to everyone Lifelong learning Specific skills are not necessary
	Cognitive strength	To escape everyday schemas To give a personal contribution to the performance It helps to use creativity, imagination and fantasy It helps to develop a personal style It gives ideas for performances To adapt yourself to the environment and to unknown people
	Emotive strength	To react to unexpected situations To feel free, do not feel judged To overcome failure fear To reduce inhibitions
	Weaknesses	Improvisation is often repetitive (stereotype movements) Improvisation is often banal (to overcome clichés) Improvising too much reduces stimuli Revision is impossible

Motor strength

With regard to motor strength, dance improvisation was considered accessible to everyone as it can start from a very basic level in which specific skills are not necessary. 'Improvisation goes beyond motor skills and can be offered to all: from children to adults and seniors, but at the same time it is also an art for professionals'. This statement points out that improvisation could be used in many contexts and with different participants' characteristics and ages.

Cognitive strength

Teachers reported several cognitive strengths: dance improvisation offers the possibility to escape everyday schemas and it helps to use creativity, imagination and fantasy. 'For those who do classic [al ballet] it is useful for getting out of the predetermined schema'. This statement underlines that dance improvisation could be useful for classical dancers to introduce creativity and experiencing new aspects outside predefined schema. Another teacher asserted: 'It allows you to develop your own unique vocabulary beyond the kinetic, motor and compositional habits'. This quote points out that improvisation could give aids for developing a personal style. The improvised movement phrases developed during improvisation sessions can give ideas for new movements within choreography. 'Dance improvisation allows you to reclaim what it is yours; it allows you to be not only an interpreter, but also a creator'. This statement says that improvisation allows a performer to share the creation of what is happening and to offer a personal contribution to the performance. Improvisation develops also the process of adaptation to the environment and to unknown people, and to react to unexpected situations.

Emotive strength

With regard to the emotive domain, a friendly improvisation environment reduces inhibitions and helps participants to overcome the fear of failure. 'Improvisation exceeds the rigid pattern in which a dancer is always subjected to dichotomic constraints such as right/wrong, good/bad [...]', 'It is useful because it melts the blocks of the conscious dancing'. These statements point out that dance improvisation facilitates participants to feel free to react and to express themselves without any pressure or feelings of being judged.

Weaknesses

The weaknesses in dance improvisation teaching include that improvisation is often a repetition of stereotype movements. Participants sometimes replicate a movement pattern without producing anything new. For this reason, improvisation can be often banal and it is therefore important to overcome clichés and well-known formulas. Improvising too much can make one feel empty. Another limitation mentioned by teachers is that no revision is possible for improvisation since it happens in real time and dancers can react, but they cannot cancel previous actions or movements. This is due to the implicit characteristics of dance improvisation. However, in this case dance improvisation can be videotaped and analysed for further developments.

Discussion

The interview analysis provided a rich scenario of the teacher experiences and concepts about the areas that typically a dance teacher deals with in a general class

on improvisation. The following five themes emerged: definitions, skills, lesson implementation, techniques and advantages/disadvantages. It would be interesting to discuss the relevance of similar aspects in other research, although there is a wide variability in the contexts and participants involved. The closest study (Lord 2001) was an interpretive study in which data were collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews to describe the teaching practices of improvisation as they naturally occurred, while in the current research, the focus was on the general motor and mental abilities involved, the basic exercises, the most frequently used ideas for dance improvisation teaching, revealing the teacher views of these aspects.

In the current research, teachers defined dance improvisation as linked to emotive and cognitive domains, accounting the expression of inner states and of several cognitive processes. The expression of inner states is a complex process as dance improvisation does not convey a simple message or a narrative aesthetic: the body has a unique language, through which the personality, the ideas and the feelings of the individual are transmitted. Dance improvisation allows one to directly express these aspects. The results of this study are in agreement with Blom and Chaplin (1988); Pesonen (2008); and Ribeiro and Fonseca (2011) who discussed the complexity of dance improvisation.

With regard to skills, this research demonstrates the presence of several motor, perceptual/cognitive, awareness, non-verbal communicative and emotive abilities. Teachers recognised the values of improvisation and demonstrated awareness about the potentialities of improvisation as well as skills and competences developed during the educational activities. This result is in agreement with other research studies. Chappell (2007) and Connell (2009) accounted the development of confidence and motivation. Brehm and Kampfe (1997), Blom and Chaplin (1988) considered mental awareness a central issue of improvisation. Carter (2000, 182) noted that improvisation stimulate reflection since improvisation 'invites examining a situation from various angles that can be invented in the very process of creation'.

With regard to the lesson implementation, several aspects concerning planning, the lesson, the method used and the evaluation process were reported. Teachers demonstrated a conscious and reflective approach to improvisation teaching since they were able to carefully describe the process of the educational activities. This interpretation of the results supports the findings of analogue research conducted by Lord (2001), who considered teaching strategies in dance improvisation, and by Doughty et al. (2008), who developed students' evaluation skills. A learner-centred approach in dance improvisation teaching was also evident, which is not widely considered in the literature. The results of this study are in agreement with Warburton (2004, 71) who considered creative improvisation as an activity which involves in teachers an 'increased appreciation for learner-centered instructional methods'.

With regard to the techniques, several approaches were mentioned. This result supports the findings of other studies (Morgenroth 1987), in which several exercises for developing dance improvisation were reported also if the exercises were differently categorised.

With regard to the advantages/disadvantages, several motor, cognitive and emotive strengths were identified. The development of creativity was mentioned and dance improvisation was considered a source of inspiration for choreography. The results of this study support the findings by Kloppenberg (2010), Lavender (2009), Lavender and Predock-Linnell (2001), Minton (1997), Smith-Autard (2010),

who recognise improvisation as an approach to the selection and organisation process of choreography. Also some weaknesses were reported by teachers of the current research which provided a critical view of dance improvisation. Probably, the weaknesses of dance teaching improvisation are less considered in the literature, and this could be a different finding between this study and the other research studies. However, Carter (2000, 182) noted that 'improvisation as a form of performance runs the risk of falling into habitual repetitive patterns that may become stale for both performers and viewers'. Weaknesses are important at the same time, because they give input and make the teacher aware of the risks and what to avoid in dance improvisation teaching.

An additional aspect regards the context in which this research was developed. Since the participants were Italian, we should weigh the impact of the Italian context on the subject of our research. In this section, findings from different contexts and countries were compared and it seems that there are several common aspects between Italian dance teachers and dance teachers from other countries. In addition, globalisation and the possibility to share dance improvisation experience through the internet stimulate the exchange of professional know-how between dance teachers all over the world. It would be interesting to look at the following two questions: how might any of the held perspectives relate to the culture of dance education in Italy? How do they relate to the larger global dance education community?

In summary, dance teachers demonstrate a generally favourable mental attitude in the use of meta-cognitive strategies, sharing a goal-oriented approach to dance improvisation teaching. They demonstrated awareness about several aspects of dance improvisation teaching such as the lesson implementation, the abilities involved, the lesson organisation and the goals to be reached.

Conclusions

Educational implications

The interviews provide a rich and comprehensive framework of how teachers consider the improvisation in dance education, offering a wide overview of teachers' perspectives. Results found several approaches used by dance teachers demonstrating the relevance of improvisation techniques in dance education in agreement with other research on dance improvisation (Blom and Chaplin 1988; Chappell 2007; Connell 2009; Kloppenberg 2010; Lavender and Predock-Linnel 2001; Lord 2001).

The results of the current research support dance improvisation didactics and aim at its further improvement. The current research leads us to expect that improvisation activities can be useful not only for professional dancers, but also in wider circles, even outside the dance world. Several advantages were recognised and dance improvisation could be considered a relevant formative subject, developing motor, cognitive and emotive abilities. This interpretation of the results supports the findings of analogue research conducted by Lord (2001).

Several structural dance lesson goals were mentioned and the development of assessment strategies seems to be a crucial point to be addressed, as well as didactic activities based on processes rather than on products. The results of the current research provide input for developing an analysis on the most important processes involved in dance improvisation. This framework could be used for reflecting on the implicit level of improvisation teaching as a key factor to promote the

development of meta-cognition strategies in improvisation (Biasutti and Frezza 2009). Learning to improvise could be facilitated by process-oriented improvisation teaching. Developing awareness about improvisation activity goals enhances evaluation strategies for assessing skills and competences, offering proper evaluation tools. These aspects could be used for developing a reflective teacher model in dance education, since dance improvisation teaching involves complex cognitive abilities which go beyond a mere instructional level.

Implications for further research

The results of this study have implications for the field of research on dance improvisation. Further study on this field is supported. Teachers reported that dance improvisation is a complex process involving several domains interconnecting motor skills, cognitive abilities, emotive correlates and communication abilities. It would be interesting to analyse the cognitive processes involved in dance improvisation, since cognition is a key aspect in dance improvisation.

There are other open questions with regard to improvisation teaching which were not covered in the current study and that could be developed in further research. For example, how do teachers develop their manner of teaching dance improvisation? what are the similarities and what are the specificities in dance improvisation teaching in relation to the different setting? What are the politics of the institutions or academies about improvisation in dance teaching? How teachers adapt their teaching according to the institution policy? How do teachers frame improvisation in their curriculum design? How dance improvisation could be connected with other school activities in an interdisciplinary perspective?

Also other aspects regarding the development of teaching skills such as the grade and acquirement for observation and evaluation of the improvisation activities could be considered. How using improvisation in teaching dance could contribute to the development as a general teacher? How the skills developed during dance improvisation could be transferred to other contexts? There are also other variables that could be addressed such as individual and cooperative improvisation. How do the underlined processes vary in solo and group improvisation?

The qualitative approach of the current research has limitations because of the limited number of participants. The current research results, however, are a platform for developing a future research plan with a quantitative design involving a larger number of participants. The qualitative data emerged in the current study could be used for developing a closed questionnaire that reflects on the participant perspective on several aspects involved in improvisation in dance education. Within a quantitative approach it will be possible to narrow the research focus to one particular purpose, for example contrasting the improvisation teaching habits in different settings such as higher education, vocational academies or private dance schools. In framing a quantitative research also other variables could be considered such as background of participants and different level of expertise, for example contrasting trainee and in-service dance teachers. This research could give inputs on the different strategies used by more and less experienced teachers. A larger number of participants could be involved, also from different countries, employing quantitative data collection techniques and parametric statistical analysis.

Notes on contributor

Michele Biasutti PhD is an associate professor at Padova University. Among his research topics, there are the cognitive processes in composition and improvisation, online learning and teacher education. He is proposing an approach to education based on the development of processes rather than products. He is the scientific director of research projects, and he has published articles in international peer-reviewed journals. He was the scientific director of the international conferences Psychology and Music Education (PME04) and Training Music Teachers (TMT07) and author of seven books. He is the President of the Italian Society for Music Education.

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Improvisation interview for dance teachers

1st Part: General information

Age _____ Gender: M F

Kind of dance teaching: _____

Dance styles usually performed in order of importance:

Years of professional experience in dance teaching: _____

Years of professional experience in dance performance: _____

Years of experience in using improvisation in dance teaching : _____

Years of experience in using improvisation in dance performance: _____

2nd Part: Dance improvisation teaching

- (1) What do you mean by dance improvisation?
- (2) What are the motor abilities in dance improvisation?
- (3) What are the mental abilities in dance improvisation?
- (4) What are the basic exercises for dance improvisation teaching?
- (5) What are the most frequently used ideas for dance improvisation teaching?
- (6) How could dance improvisation be taught?
- (7) What are the educational paths that you follow in dance improvisation teaching?
- (8) How do you organise a lesson when you teach dance improvisation?