



DAN-108: IMPROVISATION FOR DANCE AND THEATER

Also listed as: THA-108

Effective Term

Fall 2025

BOT Approval Date

05/09/2024

Discipline

DAN - Dance

Course Number

108

Course Title

Improvisation for Dance and Theater

Short Title

Improvisation Dance/Theatre

Credit Status (CB 04)

D - Credit - Degree applicable

Units

Lecture Units

3.00

Total Units

3.00

Hours

Lecture Contact Hours

48-54

Out of Class Hours Lecture

96-108

Total Contact Hours

48 - 54

Total Out of Class Hours

96 - 108

Total Student Learning Hours

144 - 162

Distance Education

No

Cross Listed Course(s)

THA-108

C-ID (Admin Only)

CB 00

CCC000600609

Course Title

Improvisation for Dance and Theater

Catalog Description

This course explores unscripted dance and theater using techniques found in action theater, dance, mask work, contact improvisation, viewpoints, and theater games within the historical and cultural context of these methods. Students will develop as whole performers through learning intuitive and present moment response techniques that apply to all performance situations.

Codes**TOP Code (CB 03)**

1008.00 - Dance

CIP Code

50.0301 - Dance, General.

Repeatability Code

No

Grading Option

Letter grade OR P/NP

GE Information**Check GE Types Requested**

AA/AS C - Humanities

AA/AS E - Lifelong Learning and Self-Development

Learning Objectives**Learning Objectives****Learning Objective**

1. Explore and analyze improvisation methods, techniques, and theories for dance and theater performance.
2. Compose, perform, and evaluate improvisational work for personal growth in vocal and physical creative expression.
3. Exhibit the neutral body, authentic presence, and improved focus.
4. Create, evaluate, and explore storytelling within a variety of cultural contexts using the body, voice, and/or basic props.
5. Demonstrate an increased ability of the total instrument (intellectual, physical, intuitive) to respond with immediacy to a given improvisational situation.
6. Investigate the cultural and historical context of improvisational practices and their foundation in African dance traditions.
7. Experiment with dance improvisational practices, including contact improvisation, which explore response to the environment, sharing of weight, and a developing ensemble consciousness.
8. Compose movement within a given improvisational structure making creative choices in terms of shape, time, and energy.
9. Compare, contrast, and examine the dual consciousness of mask work in various cultural traditions as it applies to current use in theater and dance.
10. Document ways in which the study of improvisation requires healthy lifestyle behaviors in order to effectively meet the demands of immediate response, self-expression, and physicalized character development.

Learning Outcome Information

Course Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcome
1. The student will approach learning with strategies, skills and desire to seek understanding.
2. The student will engage diverse material by listening openly, questioning, and/or thinking flexibly.
3. The student will persist in completing tasks by using resources and processes.

Program Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcome
Apply knowledge and skills gained to new and varied situations through dance expression.
Compose, perform and evaluate works of artistic expression.
Develop an awareness of the history, diversity, and cultural significance of dance.
Discover and evaluate movement through the use of aesthetic tools gained.

Institutional Learning Outcomes

Aesthetic Awareness: The student will identify and evaluate how aesthetic expression leads to an appreciation of social and cultural context as well as the values of art and nature.

Communication: The student will effectively express and exchange ideas through listening, speaking, reading, writing, visual works, and other modes of interpersonal expression.

Critical Thinking: The student will analyze problems, gather and synthesize relevant information, evaluate ideas, information, and evaluate alternative points of view to create, innovate and implement effective solutions.

Cultural Awareness and Humility: The student will demonstrate knowledge of and sensitivity toward individuals of diverse ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, and religious affiliations, as well as toward those individuals with diverse abilities and socio-economic classes to respectfully interact with individuals of diverse perspectives, beliefs and values while being mindful of the limitation of their own cultural frameworks.

Content

Course Lecture Content

1. Introduction to Improvisation
 - a. Historical Roots/Cultural Context
 - i. African Traditions
 - ii. Use of African elements in contemporary practices
 - iii. Commedia Dell'arte
 - iv. Development of solo and group forms
 - v. Post-modernism
 - vi. Origins of all performance
 - vii. Improvisational Forms and Structures
2. Theories and practice
 - a. Viewpoints -Mary Overlie, Anne Bogart, Tina Landau
 - b. Theatre games – Spolin
 - c. Action theatre-Zaporah
 - d. Post-modern dance
 - e. Contact improvisation-Steve Paxton, others
 - f. Mask work – Eldredge, Commedia
 - g. Jazz music
 - h. Performance art
3. Why improvisation?
 - a. Development of the total performer
 - i. Spontaneity-dealing with the unexpected as well as the foreseen
 - ii. Immediacy
 - iii. Intuition
 - iv. Presence
 - v. Discovery

-
- vi. Development of the senses
 - vii. Articulation of the voice and body
 - viii. Readiness at any given moment to respond authentically and appropriately
 - ix. Imprinting and inscribing mental and emotional forms onto the actor's other consciousness through physicality
 - b. Essence of who we are and what we do
4. Movement explorations, warming up the body and mind
- a. Finding neutral
 - i. Receptivity
 - ii. Adaptability
 - iii. Flexibility
5. Prepare body for movement and vocalization
- a. Release techniques
 - b. Focus and concentration
 - c. Breath work
 - d. Presence
6. Develop comfort in the space
- a. Individual
 - b. Group
7. Building trust
- a. Orientation
 - b. Openness
 - c. Dialogue
8. Mask work
- a. Multi-cultural uses and origins
 - i. Africa
 - ii. Indigenous North America
 - iii. Asia
 - iv. Latin America
 - v. Commedia
 - b. Functions
 - i. Performance, Ritual, Ceremonial
 - ii. Frame
 - iii. Mirror
 - iv. Mediator
 - v. Catalyst
 - vi. Transformer
 - c. Context of movements, activities, and paraphernalia
 - i. Time
 - ii. Power
 - iii. Trance
 - d. Masks that may be explored
 - i. Neutral
 - ii. Character
 - iii. Animal
 - iv. Found object masks
 - e. The Lessons of the mask
 - i. psychophysical release
 - ii. cast of characters from within
 - iii. Recognizing dual consciousness
 - iv. Living in and through the image of the mask
 - v. Recognizing the presence of the critical voice
 - vi. Dealing with issues of control
9. Contact Improvisation

-
- a. History
 - i. Reflection of social issues
 - 1. Civil Rights/Equality/Equity
 - ii. Founder-Steve Paxton
 - b. Connections to self and other
 - i. Weight sensing and bearing
 - ii. Weight sharing and transferring
 - 1. Expanding boundaries of self
 - 2. Trust
 - 3. Generosity
 - 4. Collaborations
 - c. Natural laws and use
 - i. Gravity
 - ii. Momentum
 - iii. Inertia
10. Theatre Games – the following are examples of what may be offered and is not meant to be comprehensive or exclusive
- a. History
 - i. Founder-Viola Spolin
 - ii. Origins of improvisational theater
 - b. Orientation
 - i. Introduction to the exercise
 - ii. Point of concentration
 - iii. Side coaching
 - iv. Evaluation Points of Observation
 - c. “Where” games
 - i. Reaching beyond ourselves
 - ii. Immediate, general, and larger environments
 - d. “Acting with the whole body” games
 - i. to physicalize through side coaching
 - ii. to experience the total organism
 - iii. to foster unstilted behavior
 - e. “Non-directional blocking” games
 - i. Integration of the stage picture
 - ii. Heighten thought and action
 - iii. Facilitate movement
 - iv. Strengthen action
 - v. Establishes the give and take between performer and director
 - vi. Seeing the stage from the audience’s point-of-view
 - f. “Refining awareness” games
 - i. Listening
 - ii. Seeing and not staring
 - iii. Verbal agility
 - iv. Contact
 - v. Silence
 - g. “Developing material for situations” games
 - i. Word games
 - ii. Once-upon-a-time
 - iii. Transforming the object
 - iv. Leaving something on stage
 - v. Hidden problem
 - vi. Suggestions by the audience
11. Action Theater-acting from “lively emptiness”
- a. Exercises and ideas in life-like and non-life-like situations
 - i. Expand awareness
 - ii. Stimulate imagination
 - iii. Strengthen capacity for feeling

- iv. Develop skills of expression
 - v. Freeing from habitual perceptions and behaviors
 - b. Physical explorations through
 - i. Forms
 - 1. Open
 - 2. Content-less
 - ii. Address how an individual organizes specific aspects of behavior or experience
 - 1. Invitation to deconstruct habitual behaviors and responses
 - 2. Increased consciousness of moment to moment
 - a. Thoughts
 - b. Sensations
 - c. Emotions
 - d. Feelings
 - e. Fantasies
- 12. Post-modern dance
 - a. History
 - i. Challenge to standard theatrical forms
 - ii. Reflection of cultural changes
 - 1. sexuality
 - 2. gender
 - 3. race
 - iii. Egalitarianism
 - iv. Connection to African forms
 - b. Elements
 - i. Space
 - ii. Shape
 - iii. Time
 - iv. Movement
 - v. Chance
 - c. Explorations may be drawn from the following broad topics
 - i. Awareness
 - ii. The body's voice
 - iii. Noticing the activity of the mind
 - iv. Body/Imagination/Memory Inner/Outer
 - v. Pretend to pretend
 - vi. The body of language
 - vii. Transformation
 - 1. "Empty" form
 - 2. Tracking the change
 - viii. Imagination
 - ix. The watcher and the watched
 - x. Response
 - xi. Relationship
 - xii. People and Props
 - xiii. Dreams
 - d. Performance scores
- 13. Other improvisations from dance and theatre, as appropriate

Methods of Instruction

Method

Directed Study

Integration

A directed study will be used that requires students to compose movement within a given improvisational structure to develop an understanding of the impact of shape, time, and energy in a performance project.

Method

Discussion

Integration

A discussion will be held to facilitate deep observation and experience of improvisational work to enhance the student's understanding of techniques and processes related to improvisational practices. Requires evaluation of personal growth in vocal and physical creative expression.

Method

Group Projects

Integration

Cooperative group projects will be utilized to focus on a specific improvisational property, character, or theme to explore, create, and evaluate storytelling using the body, voice, and/or basic props reflecting a specific cultural tradition.

Method

In-class Exercises

Integration

An in-class exercise will be used to analyze and appraise the ways in which the expressive body is dependent upon lifestyle behaviors that support health, wellness, and fitness to effectively communicate through the art of improvisation.

Method

Lecture

Integration

A lecture will be delivered on the cultural and historical contexts of improvisational practices and their foundation in African dance traditions.

Method

Live Performance Viewing

Integration

Students will attend a live performance and write a response paper that evaluates the use of improvisational elements and creative content. Students will specifically look for improvisational structures within the performance and discuss authentic presence, spontaneity, and immediate response.

Method

Projects

Integration

A project related to the design, construction, and use of masks in improvisational structures will be utilized to provide students with the opportunity to explore, analyze, and compare the dual consciousness of mask work in various cultural traditions as it applies to current use in theater and dance.

Methods of Evaluation

Method

Class Participation

Integration

Class participation will be assessed by the instructor to evaluate students' understanding and correct usage of authentic presence, neutral body, trust, spontaneity, dual consciousness, showing/not telling, etc. Criteria for assessment include the student's demonstrated and physicalized understanding of the elements listed above as well as the ability to stay on task with focused attention throughout the performance of class exercises.

Method

Class Performance

Integration

Class performance of improvisational structures will be assessed by the instructor for the essential skills of spontaneity, response to the environment, problem-solving, focused concentration, and a developing ensemble consciousness. Criteria for grading will also include the willingness to explore, the ability to stay on task, the immediacy of response, and the demonstrated awareness of classmates in the ensemble process.

Method

Homework

Integration

Homework will include writing an analysis that discusses the impact of African improvisational practices on a specific theatrical, musical, and/or dance performance tradition. Papers should be clearly written, include a thesis statement and conclusion, and demonstrate an understanding of the African influences and aesthetics that impact the chosen artistic tradition.

Method

Self-Evaluation

Integration

A self-evaluation in which the student explores the ways the expressive human body is dependent upon healthful living and overall fitness will be assessed. The student should categorize specific strategies utilized to support their artistic and creative efforts in class, which may include lifestyle changes in relationship to diet, exercise, meditation, or breath support. Grading criteria will include clarity of intent, demonstration of applied changes in lifestyle, and an understanding that each body is different and has specific needs.

Method

Capstone Project

Integration

A capstone project performed in class that deeply explores one of the major improvisational practices studied in the course will be assessed. Assessment criteria will include performance with a clear beginning, middle, and end, expressed artistic value, improvisational structures utilized effectively, design that aligns with the chosen form, and a demonstrated understanding and respect for the cultural and historical influences that come into play. The instructor will evaluate each project individually and will provide verbal feedback as it relates to the rubric.

Method

Projects

Integration

Individual projects that physicalize, explore, and demonstrate knowledge of improvisational concepts, practices, and structures will be assessed. Grading criteria will consider the student's ability to clearly illustrate comprehension of the specific form utilized in action and performance, including presence, immediacy of response, and authentic voice. Verbal and/or written feedback will be provided from the instructor.

Assignments**Assignment Type**

Other

In-class and/or outside of class

Outside of class

Formative or Summative

Formative

Assignment

Create and design a found object mask. Create a non-human character from this mask, and present a 3-minute movement study that demonstrates clear objectives and intention. The study must have a clearly defined beginning, middle, and ending, as studied in class. Be prepared to discuss the specific cultural connections to your mask and the related performance. What did you borrow or how were you influenced by the various cultures studied in class?

Assignment Type

Writing

In-class and/or outside of class

Outside of class

Formative or Summative

Summative

Assignment

After viewing a live performance, write a 3-page analysis paper that evaluates the work for creative composition and improvisational structures. Be sure to discuss any historical or cultural influences and elements in the work as well as improvisational elements: authentic presence, spontaneity, and immediate response by the actors or dancers.

Assignment Type

Reading

In-class and/or outside of class

In-class

Formative or Summative

Formative

Assignment

Read the introduction to Free Play by Stephen Nachmanovitch and be ready to discuss in class. Share your interpretation of intuitive presence given Nachmanovitch's description and analysis. Consider the qualities that allow you to see it in another performer and also how you find it when you are the performer. Examine your own familial/cultural behaviors and values that either facilitate or hinder your connection to intuitive presence.

Assignment Type

Other

In-class and/or outside of class

In-class

Formative or Summative

Formative

Assignment

After having performed six abstract qualities with a neutral mask, write a 3-page analysis of what you have discovered about the dual consciousness (inner and outer perspectives) of mask work. How does this intersect with your lived experience? Feel free to include aspects of your personal identity that come into play (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality).

Assignment Type

Other

In-class and/or outside of class

Outside of class

Formative or Summative

Summative

Assignment

At the end of a unit, create a response that demonstrates your understanding of the concepts and practices studied. Consider how these elements can be applied to your own performance practice(s) and how they inspire your creative process. You may choose a performance response, an art response, OR a written response (3-page minimum) to demonstrate what you have learned. Detailed instructions will be provided in class.

Assignment Type

Other

In-class and/or outside of class

In-class

Formative or Summative

Formative

Assignment

According to Anne Bogart, there are four specific varieties of energy available to every actor at each and every moment: Horizontal Energy, Vertical Energy, Heavy Energy, and Light Energy. Prepare a single 2-minute study, representing a single human character demonstrating all four of these energies at different times in your study. The voice should be used in this study, using only non-verbal sounds, as explored in our class work.

Course Materials**Textbooks**

Razowsky, David (2023). A Subversive's Guide to Improvisation: Moving Beyond "Yes, And." Boyd Park Press. 979-8218068370
Nachmanovitch, Stephen (1991). Free play: Improvisation in Life and Art Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam. ISBN: 0-87477-631-7
Spolin, Viola (1999). Improvisation for the Theater Northwestern UP. ISBN: 0-8101-4008x
Zaporah, Ruth (1995). Action Theater: The Improvisation of Presence North Atlantic Books. ISBN: 1556431864
Bogart, A. Landau, T. (2005). The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition Theatre Communications Group. ISBN: 978-1559362412

Olsen, Andrea (2014). *The Place of Dance: A Somatic Guide to Dancing and Dance Making* Wesleyen. ISBN: 9780819574053
Potter, Nicole (2017). *Movement For Actors* (Second Edition) Allworth Press. ISBN: 978-1621535416

Other Resources

Minimum Qualification

Open Educational Resources

Yes. The following book is available online through the MSJC library: Olsen, Andrea (2014). *The Place of Dance: A Somatic Guide to Dancing and Dance Making* Wesleyen. ISBN: 9780819574053

Class Size Information

Class Size

30

Class Size Category

F - Individualized, skills#based instruction/field practice 30

Diversity and Inclusion

Explain how diversity and inclusion(e.g., gender, culture/race, sexuality, etc.) is infused into the course.

While improvisation has its foundation in African practice, improvisation in academic settings has often been taught from a Europeanist perspective, appropriating African elements and practices without acknowledgment. Instructors of this course will teach the history of improvisation, acknowledging the African origins as well as the appropriations. Students will understand and embody the historical practices and will be encouraged to embody their own racial, sexual, gender and other identities through the explorations of improvisational techniques and practices. In this way, this course will engage with and affirm individual identities within the context of course content creating a positive and safe learning environment for the students. Through lectures, discussion, readings, and practices of improvisational theater and dance, instructors will validate the contributions and importance of non-western practitioners and forms as equal to western practitioners and forms. Within the context of teaching improvisational elements, devices, and practices, students are encouraged to create according to their own imperative. Every improvisational study they produce has self and/or cultural expression at its heart. As they create improvisational studies, they are encouraged to find intersections between their own identities and the skills being taught and explored. Students may use any inspiration and are encouraged to feel free to express any concern or make any statement they wish to make within the context of the assignment. The intent is always their own. Everything students produce in this course is the product of their own individual creativity as influenced by their backgrounds, experiences, concerns, fears, joys, politics, beliefs, and cultural, national, ethnic, political, gender and sexual identities. Recognition and mindfulness of the systemic barriers and social oppression that impact some students based on race, gender, sexual identity, disability, size, etc., will be considered in an attempt to reduce harm, allow students to feel accepted for who they are, regardless of ability, body size, etc., and create an equitable experience and outcome for all.

Describe how assignments, instruction, evaluation, course content, and interactions are contextualized for diverse learners promoting an equitable course.

This course utilizes various modalities, including lecture, readings, visual demonstrations, verbal description, movement, embodied practice, the viewing of video, as well as feedback and assessment connected to each assignment and activity to deliver course material and teach students the basics of improvisational practice and performance. Since multiple ways to approach learning are provided, students have the opportunity to excel according to their individual learning styles, strengths, inclinations, learning differences and dispositions. Individual growth is facilitated through various class practices and assignments designed to give students firsthand experience at dealing with different improvisational problems; this is coupled with examples demonstrated live or on video, instruction, feedback, and encouragement, so there is always more than one approach to solve said problem. The individual approaches and responses to assignments are assessed for demonstration of understanding of the concepts and aesthetics while also observing the unique and individual manner in which an assignment is completed; the improvisational work will reflect the proclivities and affinities of each individual student as they solve the problem and/or complete the tasks of any given assignment. A class in improvisation engages multiple senses, and individual sensibilities and ways of expressing oneself through movement and language, with the added element of creativity married to critical thinking that must both be utilized in the construction of an improvisational study. Despite the fact that embodied learning is often overlooked in education as being merely physical (and thus somehow not as worthy or valuable), it actually tends to be deeply ingrained and retained; therefore students enjoy a different kind of success: one in which all aspects of their beings are employed to express themselves not only with language (which some students may not excel at), but through expressive gesture and movement of the human body. The fact that they need no previous training in order to be able to succeed in this course is often revelatory. Through embodied, kinesthetic learning, coupled with creative endeavor, students employ multiple senses, intelligences, and learning styles while engaging in a unique educational environment in which all are accepted and treated with respect and in which students experience that their points of view, creativity, invention, and individuality are valued, regardless of their backgrounds, politics, beliefs, cultural, national, ethnic, political, gender and sexual identities, or previous success in the educational environment.

Interactions

Explain how the course will incorporate student-to-student interaction.

In a course that teaches improvisation, assignments and studies are rehearsed in groups or as solos and performed live. Students will often be placed in small groups to collaborate on assignments and solve an improvisational problem or task, assisting one another, working out details, as well as collaborating with immediacy of response as they perform together. The interpretation of and approach to an assignment, as well as the performance they create, are unique to the individual student or group and help to broaden the understanding of other students through the performance of the work. Feedback is offered between students p following the performance of the study or practice as well as during the work to create an improvisation or work out an improvisational task. Students are encouraged to remark on ways in which the individual or group solved the improvisational problem and what they observed that was surprising or unique that could be applied in future assignments.

Explain how the course will incorporate instructor-to-student interaction.

A large portion of course content is delivered by the instructor in class visually, through physical demonstration, and verbally through lecture and description. Feedback and direction are also significant parts of an improvisational course, with the instructor providing guidance on the side while the students improvise as well as offering feedback to performed student work and works-in-progress. This direction and feedback is most often verbal and provided almost continuously in every class, but sometimes may be written. Students ask frequent questions of the instructor in order to understand all aspects of an improvisational task or assignment. Improvisational courses require that interactions between students and instructor are constant throughout.

Explain how the course will incorporate student-to-content interaction.

Interaction with course material happens with each improvisational task and assignment. Students respond to assignments with immediacy, creating unique performances on the spot, but also by working with improvisational scores and practices. As each assignment is introduced and practiced, students become more aware and fluent with these elements and devices that further develop their individual improvisational skill set. Assignments are given and performed live in class each day, so students are exposed to new content, devices, and approaches constantly. Their understanding of improvisational concepts and how to solve improvisational task is developed each day.

Explain how the course will incorporate student-to-self interaction (metacognitive).

Metacognition is a significant part of an improvisational course because of the embodied nature of the form which requires one to be cognizant of both movement and intent. A student is constantly self-evaluating as they practice this art form, holding the dual experience of reacting with immediacy and considering the impacts of their choices. Performance is then further evaluated after the fact as students discuss their work or journal about their experience. This leads students to consider what personal experiences in their lives have informed their process and performance choices. Performance of improvisation is an intimate act that requires ongoing self-reflection, especially in regard to intent and meaning behind why a choice was made. Students also reflect on their personal growth over the semester as they consider the ways in which creating improvisational studies has impacted physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional aspects of their lives. Ultimately, improvisation is a representation of who we are in the moment and requires interaction with all aspects of our psyche in order to give physical expression to ideas, conflicts, concerns, emotions and experiences through movement.