

# Investigating the Relationship Between Dance Flow and Improvisation

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## Abstract

This article explores the intrinsic connection between dance flow and improvisation, aiming to analyze dancers' thinking and behavioral patterns in dance creation from a psychological perspective. The study points out that the application of flow theory in the field of dance is relatively scarce, while improvisation, as a core skill in dance art, requires dancers to create without preset conditions. The article begins with an overview of flow theory, emphasizing how the flow state facilitates dancers' technical performance and creativity. It then analyzes the improvisational practices of professional dancers to reveal the positive interactive relationship between flow and improvisation. The research finds that dancers in a flow state are more likely to enter a state of improvisation, and improvisation itself can also stimulate the flow experience. The article concludes with a discussion on the role of dance flow and improvisation in dance education and performance practice, highlighting the importance of relational creativity in dance creation.

**Keywords:** flow theory, dance flow, improvisation

## 1. Introduction

This study focuses on the flow state often experienced by dancers in the process of dance creation, a state that allows them to be fully engaged and to produce outstanding dance works. Although the flow theory has been widely applied in various fields, research related to the field of dance is relatively scarce. Flow, proposed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, describes the deep immersive experience people have during activities. Improvisation, as a core skill in dance art, requires dancers to create on the spot without preset conditions, showcasing unique dance movements.

The aim of this study is to explore the connection between flow and improvisation, to analyze the thinking and behavioral patterns of dancers from a psychological perspective, and to provide scientific guidance for dance education and professional training. The research results will provide theoretical support for dance art practice and promote the innovation and development of dance.

The purpose of the study is to reveal the intrinsic connection between dance flow and improvisation, offering a new perspective for the theory and practice of dance creation. The significance of the research lies in deepening the understanding of dance creation, providing effective guidance for dance education and training, promoting the development of the discipline, and enhancing the audience's viewing experience, thereby advancing the progress of dance art and social culture.

## 2. Flow Theory and Dance Flow

### 2.1 Overview of Flow Theory

Flow theory was proposed by American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Flow is an optimal state of experience where individuals feel a high level of concentration and deep enjoyment. This state is so engaging

that people are willing to invest significant energy to experience it (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow is a state of complete immersion and enjoyment in an activity, where one's attention is fully focused on the task at hand, experiencing a focus and pleasure that seems to sustain itself without effort (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). When in a state of flow, individuals are fully absorbed, experiencing a coexistence of tension and fluidity, a diminished sense of time, a fading of self-awareness, and complete immersion in the activity. Flow experiences are prevalent in various fields such as music, sports, and art, and they positively affect individuals' psychological health, as well as their work and learning processes.

In the field of dance, flow is understood as a state of full engagement that dancers experience during performance or practice (Cho Yong-ju, 2010), which helps dancers to express their techniques and creativity, enhancing their level of performance (Kim Ji-young et al., 2012). Dance flow is closely connected to improvisation, which can generate empathy with the audience (Kim Ga-eun & Hong Mi-sung, 2020). Improvisation requires dancers to create freely based on immediate inspiration without preset conditions. Dancers in a state of flow can express themselves more naturally, meeting the demands of improvisation.

Research indicates a positive relationship between flow and improvisation (Choi Cheong-ja et al., 2011). Dancers in a state of flow are more likely to enter a state of improvisation because this state reduces the constraints of self-awareness and promotes the expression of creativity. At the same time, improvisation can also lead dancers into a state of flow, as the process requires full concentration and quick response, making it easier to achieve a state of flow. However, the relationship between flow and improvisation is influenced by various factors, including the dancer's skill level, performance experience, and dance style. In-depth study of this relationship can help to uncover dancers' potential and improve the effectiveness of dance teaching and choreography.

### *2.2 The Concept and Characteristics of Dance Flow*

Dance flow refers to a state of conscious psychological engagement in dance performance, creation, and practical teaching, where a clear dance task is set as the goal and a balance is achieved between personal skills and objectives. It involves a deliberate investment of body and mind into a process centered on the goal, while experiencing a state of comfort and ease, disregarding surrounding distractions, and losing track of time, reaching a state of self-forgetfulness (Gang Yi, 2021). Dance flow is a fully immersive psychological state that requires dancers to have clear objectives and the corresponding motor skills to fulfill their expressive intentions. Flow generation requires a balance between challenge and skill. The right challenge inspires motivation, while the excess leads to anxiety. In addition, dance flow requires explicit feedback that allows dancers to perceive and adjust their movements and states. Concentration is also key. Dancers need to tune out distractions and focus on the dance.

Dance flow is not only about individual psychological states but is also closely related to the performance environment, context, and audience response. Dancers achieve self-expression through flow and establish an emotional connection with the audience, whose feedback can further stimulate the dancer's state of flow.

In improvisation, dance flow helps to enhance creativity (Wang Siyu, 2020), aiding dancers in achieving coordination between thought and perception, smoothly expressing ideas and emotions, and demonstrating creativity. Investigating how dance flow promotes improvisation and how improvisation affects the state of flow is essential for improving dancers' artistic creativity and performance level.

## **3. Overview of Improvisational Creation**

Improvisational creation is a form of free expression in dance art and a key creative process in contemporary dance. It involves not only the creation of artistic materials but also the continuous formation and reshaping of the dancer themselves within the flow of action (Leach & Stevens, 2020). It emphasizes the immediacy, spontaneity, participation, innovation, and exploratory nature of the dancer's performance. This mode of creation allows dancers to abandon preset movements, revealing an authentic, personalized dance language through the burst of inspiration and improvisational movements.

### *3.1 Definition and Classification of Improvisational Creation*

Improvisational creation emphasizes spontaneity and immediacy, enabling the dance work to evolve and develop continuously during the performance process through the direct expression of the artist and the dancer's improvisational movements. The core of improvisational dance is to allow dancers to fully immerse themselves in the dance, discard preset movements and forms, and present an authentic, personalized, and free dance language through the burst of inspiration and improvisational movements (Ravn & Høffding, 2022). Some research considers improvisational creation as a creative dance practice of participatory sense-making process, requiring dancers to be sensitive to their own, others', and the environment's surfaces and textures (Hermans, 2022). Improvisational creation relies on the dancer's innovation and exploration during the improvisation process, creating dance movements through physical expression and creative thinking without preset dance

structures or rules (Leach & Stevens, 2020). Dancers need to be in a state of engagement during the improvisational creation process, allowing them to experience a sense of unity with movement, closely integrating thought and action, thus making improvisational creation more fluid and expressive. Drawing on literature, this article defines “dance improvisational creation” as: Dance improvisational creation is a form of creative expression centered on bodily movement, requiring dancers to create and perform dance without preset structures or rules, through intuitive physical responses and innovative thinking. In this process, dancers establish dynamic interactive relationships with internal inspiration, emotions, and external environments and others, thereby achieving a participatory sense-making process. This mode of creation not only promotes the personalization and authenticity of dance works but also enhances dancers’ focus and expressiveness in creation through flow experiences, making improvisational creation a vibrant and variable dance art practice.

Improvisational creation can be divided into two categories: structured improvisation and unstructured improvisation. Structured improvisation is based on certain preset or shared rules, such as specific dance styles and techniques, or certain dance compositions and combinations. This type of improvisation usually requires dancers to have a high level of artistic skill and proficiency in dance language to improvise within the framework of rules. Unstructured improvisation refers to improvisation conducted without preset or shared rules. This type of improvisation emphasizes the dancer’s personal feelings and the expression of improvisational dance movements, offering greater freedom and creativity.

### *3.2 The Process and Technique of Improvisation*

The process of improvisation includes three stages: preparation, practice and reflection. During the preparation phase, dancers improve their physical abilities through physical training and technical practice, while being inspired by observing and learning from the work of other dancers. The practical stage requires dancers to apply theoretical knowledge and techniques to actual creation, enter a state of flow, and devote themselves to creation. The reflective phase involves reviewing the creation, analyzing movement and expression, and thinking about how to improve.

In order to improve the quality of improvisation, dancers need to develop body awareness, gain a deep understanding of their bodies, and explore a variety of movements and expressions. Interaction and collaboration with other dancers can also inspire creativity and improve skills.

Improvisation is closely related to dance flow. Flow is a state of intense focus and engagement in which dancers are better able to be creative and expressive. The realization of flow helps dancers move freely and smoothly in improvisation, enhancing the expressiveness of the work.

Improvisation not only promotes the artistic creativity and personality development of dancers, but also brings brand-new artistic experience and emotional resonance to the audience. It is an important creative way in the field of modern dance and is of great significance to the prosperity of dance art and the progress of social culture.

## **4. The Relationship Between Flow and Improvisation in Dance**

### *4.1 The Common Characteristics of Dance Flow and Improvisation*

Flow and improvisation are two core concepts in dance art, which together constitute the richness and dynamics of dance creation. Dance flow is a highly concentrated state of mind in which the dancer is completely immersed in the dance and experiences the feeling of being one with the dance movement. This state is often accompanied by a loss of awareness of the passage of time, a loss of awareness of the surrounding environment, and a dilution of self-awareness, allowing the dancer to express inner emotions and creativity more freely. Improvisation, on the other hand, is a form of creation without a preset structure, which requires dancers to rely on intuition and instant creativity to create a dance without a fixed script or movement guidance. This approach emphasizes the dancer’s interaction with inner inspiration, emotion and external environment, and explores and realizes dance movements through direct expression of the body. Improvisation not only promotes the personalization and authenticity of the dance work, but also enhances the concentration and expressiveness of the dancer in the creation through the flow experience.

In dance practice, flow and improvisation promote each other and together provide a steady stream of power and innovation for the development of dance art. Flow provides a deeply engaged mental state for improvisation, and improvisation provides a rich practical platform for the realization of flow. Through this interaction, dance artists are better able to explore the possibilities of body language to create unique and infectious dance pieces. In this paper, a comparative analysis is made between flow and improvisation in dance (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison between flow and improvisation in dance

Characteristic	Dance flow	Improvisation
Sensitivity and commitment	Fully engaged with a fluid state	Instant creation without premeditation or planning
Technical and expressive skills	Requires mastery of dance technique and body control	Need a rich vocabulary of action and expression skills
Self-knowledge and self-control	Have a deep understanding of your own body state and adjustment	It requires clear cognition and physical expression of ideas and creativity

First, dance flow and improvisation both emphasize sensitivity and commitment to the present moment. In dance flow, dancers devote all their attention and energy to the dance performance, completely integrating into the dance movements and body sensations, forgetting the self and experiencing a feeling that transcends time and space. In improvisation, dancers should also put down all inhibitions and presuppositions and create dance movements and plots immediately according to their own feelings and intuitions through interaction with music and their own feelings and creativity. Dancers are in a state of flow when they express their feelings to show the characters, and when they improvise, they will also generate emotions and express the characters because of their feelings.

Second, both flow and improvisation require dancers to have a high degree of technical and expressive ability. In dance flow, dancers need to master dance techniques and body control to achieve smooth and uninterrupted movement. Only on the basis of technology can we better integrate into the dance performance and achieve the state of flow. Improvisation, on the other hand, requires dancers to make decisions quickly and transform them into actions along with the changes of music and the flow of emotions. It requires dancers to have a rich vocabulary of actions and expression skills and be able to flexibly show their own ideas and emotions. When dancers perform a work in the state of flow, the work and the dancer are integrated, and the connotation of the work is expressed through the movement language, while the movement language is generated through perception in the improvisation state.

Third, dance flow and improvisation also require dancers to have good self-cognition and self-control. In the dance flow, dancers need to have a deep understanding of their physical strength and body feeling, be able to accurately feel their body state, and timely adjust and adapt to the movement. At the same time, they also need to control their attention, avoid outside interference and distraction, and stay focused and engaged. Improvisation, on the other hand, requires dancers to make decisions quickly and put them into action, to have a clear awareness of their ideas and creativity, and to be able to express them in body language.

Dance flow and improvisation have close connection and common characteristics in dance art. Both emphasize sensitivity and devotion to the present and require dancers to have a high degree of technical and expressive skills, as well as good self-cognition and self-control. Through in-depth study of the relationship between dance flow and improvisation, we can better understand the dancers' mental state and creative process in the performance process, and provide useful inspiration and guidance for the development and promotion of dance art.

#### *4.2 The Difference Between Flow and Improvisation in Dance*

As two important forms of artistic expression, dance flow and improvisation occupy an important position in the field of dance. Although both involve the integration and expression of self and environment, there are obvious differences between dance flow and improvisation in some aspects.

First of all, there are differences between dance flow and improvisation in the creative process and power source. Dance flow is a state of self-engagement in which the artist is completely immersed in the dance, producing an experience of physical and mental unity. The formation of this state usually requires a lot of practice and repeated interpretation, and dancers will control the technical and emotional expression to meet the needs of the heart. In contrast, improvisation is a more free and flexible form of expression, emphasizing unique improvisational creativity and individual instant creative decisions. Improvisation does not rely on pre-prepared movements or music but expresses the artist's creative will and emotions through sensitivity and immediate response to the environment. Secondly, dance flow and improvisation are also different in expression and form. Dance heart flow often requires artists to communicate their inner world by mastering dance techniques and constructing emotional expression. In this process, dancers will integrate their own personality and experience

into the dance according to their existing dance movements and techniques, and through the guidance of inspiration and emotion, forming a unique artistic expression. Improvisation, on the other hand, is more about free expression, not limited to specific dance forms and rules. According to their own feelings and creativity, artists can freely use various body movements and emotional expressions in the immediate creation process, so as to form innovative and experimental works of art.

Dance flow and improvisation also have different requirements on the body and mind. Dance flow focuses on the unity of body and mind, and artists need to achieve a perfect integration of body and mind through mastering techniques and expressing emotions. In this state, artists need to have a deep understanding and mastery of dance movements and emotional expression and be able to convey complete artistic meaning through their own body language. In contrast, improvisation focuses more on flexibility and creativity of the body and mind. Artists need to have keen observation, flexible reaction ability and innovative thinking in order to be able to quickly generate unique dance movements and emotional expression in the immediate creative process.

Although dance flow and improvisation are both important forms of expression in the field of dance, there are differences in the creative process, expression mode and requirements. Through the comparative study of dance flow and improvisation, the relationship and difference between these two forms of artistic expression can be more deeply understood, so as to provide more thinking and inspiration for the further development of dance creation.

#### *4.3 The Influence of Dance Flow on Improvisation*

Dance is a highly physical art form, and improvisation is a way of expression full of freedom and creativity in dance art. Dance flow is a special state of mind. When dancers concentrate on dance activities, they will experience a sense of transcendence. This state of flow has an important impact on the development and practice of improvisation.

First of all, dance flow can enhance dancers' creativity and imagination. When the dancer is immersed in the dance flow, they enter a relaxed and focused state, aware of the passing of self and time. In this state, dancers can freely express their inner feelings, explore their inner creativity and imagination, and transform them into unique dance movements and forms. The state of relaxation and concentration brought about by this dance flow encourages dancers to take risks and try out new dance movements and structures, thus promoting the development of improvisation. Secondly, dance flow can improve dancers' technique and performance. In the state of dance flow, dancers can focus more on their body movements and performances without external interference and pressure. They are able to feel and control their bodies more carefully, so they can use various dance techniques and movements more flexibly, showing a higher level of performance ability. Dance flow can not only help dancers give full play to the dance techniques they have learned, but also stimulate their creative potential, explore new dance techniques and forms, and make improvisation full of innovation and vitality. Finally, dance flow can also strengthen the emotional resonance between the dancer and the audience. In the state of dance flow, dancers are able to convey their emotions to the audience in a direct and authentic way. The audience can feel the emotions and themes expressed by the dancers through their body language and movements. The emotional resonance brought by the dance flow enables the audience to have a deeper understanding and experience of the dancers' inner world, so as to have a stronger emotional connection with the dancers. This emotional resonance opens up more space for improvisation, and the dancer is able to communicate his creative intention more accurately and powerfully in the flow state, so that the audience can fully engage with it.

#### *4.4 Improvisation Promotes the Flow of Dance*

In the field of dance, improvisation is seen as a free, spontaneous and immediate form of artistic expression. Compared with traditional choreography, improvisation pays more attention to the dancer's immediate response and individual creativity. Therefore, it is of great significance to study improvisation on the promotion of dance flow. First, improvisation stimulates dancers' creativity and self-expression. In the process of improvisation, dancers are required to think and create quickly, unable to plan every movement in advance, and express their inner thoughts and feelings more spontaneously. This demand for improvisation allows the dancer to relax the desire to control and to focus more on personal body movements and emotional expression, thus achieving a state that is consistent with their inner feelings. This expression of freedom and spontaneity brings a breakthrough of creativity to dancers and stimulates individuality and uniqueness in dance. Second, improvisation offers dancers the opportunity to interact with the music and the environment in real time. One of the characteristics of improvisation is that it is carried out with the accompaniment of music, and dancers need to unfold the dance with the rhythm and changes of the music. This interaction with the music allows the dancer to feel the emotion and texture of the music more deeply, so as to better translate it into dance movements and emotional expression. Thirdly, improvisation is also closely related to environmental factors. Dancers need to integrate the atmosphere and feeling of the surrounding environment into the dance. This real-time interaction

allows dancers to feel and respond more deeply to the surrounding situation, making it easier to enter the realm of dance flow. In addition, improvisation also provides dancers with more performance opportunities and develops self-confidence. In improvisation, dancers are required to improvise in an immediate environment without the opportunity to rehearse in advance. In this way, dancers need to react quickly and show their skills and creativity in uncertain situations. This experience of performing in the midst of uncertainty and challenge strengthens the dancers' confidence and dancing ability.

### 5. Conclusions

This study aims to explore the relationship between dance flow and improvisation. Through the review of the existing literature and empirical research, it is found that there is a close relationship and mutual influence between dance flow and improvisation. The conclusion of this chapter aims to summarize the research findings and highlight their implications for dance education and performance practice. Firstly, the results show that dance flow is an experience state of high immersion in dance performance, which can promote the occurrence and development of improvisation. Through the observation and interview of dancers, it is found that in the state of flow, dancers can obtain higher artistic perception and expression ability, and dance movements are more expressive and creative. This state of flow helps dancers enter a state of free flow, releasing their inner creativity and emotional expression. Secondly, improvisation can also be seen as a strategy to promote flow in dance. The study found that during the improvisation process, dancers need to react quickly, without much time to think and plan. This demand for immediacy dovetails with the "here and now" experience that flow seeks. So improvisation can be a way to immerse the dancer in the dance and get into a state of flow. In addition, it is found that creative dance teaching and performance environment is very important for the promotion of dance flow and improvisation. The role of teachers and directors is to provide students and actors with a supportive and encouraging environment that inspires creativity and confidence. In this environment, dancers can be more relaxed and focused, cultivate their own dance flow, and express and develop their artistry through improvisation.

This study also points out some possible research directions in the future. For example, we can further explore the influence of different types of dance forms on dance flow and improvisation. In addition, the differences in dance flow and improvisation among dancers of different ages, different learning experiences and different cultural backgrounds can be studied.

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