

# VU Research Portal

## **Bodies not against each other: Online engagement strategies for improvisation**

O'Connor, Michael Ryan

### ***published in***

Dance Education in Practice Journal  
2022

### ***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.1080/23734833.2022.2059240](https://doi.org/10.1080/23734833.2022.2059240)

### ***document version***

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### ***document license***

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### ***citation for published version (APA)***

O'Connor, M. R. (2022). Bodies not against each other: Online engagement strategies for improvisation. *Dance Education in Practice Journal*, 8(2), 23-27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23734833.2022.2059240>

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)



## Bodies Not Against Each Other: Online Engagement Strategies for Improvisation

Michael O'Connor

To cite this article: Michael O'Connor (2022) Bodies Not Against Each Other: Online Engagement Strategies for Improvisation, *Dance Education in Practice*, 8:2, 23-27, DOI: [10.1080/23734833.2022.2059240](https://doi.org/10.1080/23734833.2022.2059240)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23734833.2022.2059240>



Published online: 03 Jun 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 99



View related articles [↗](#)

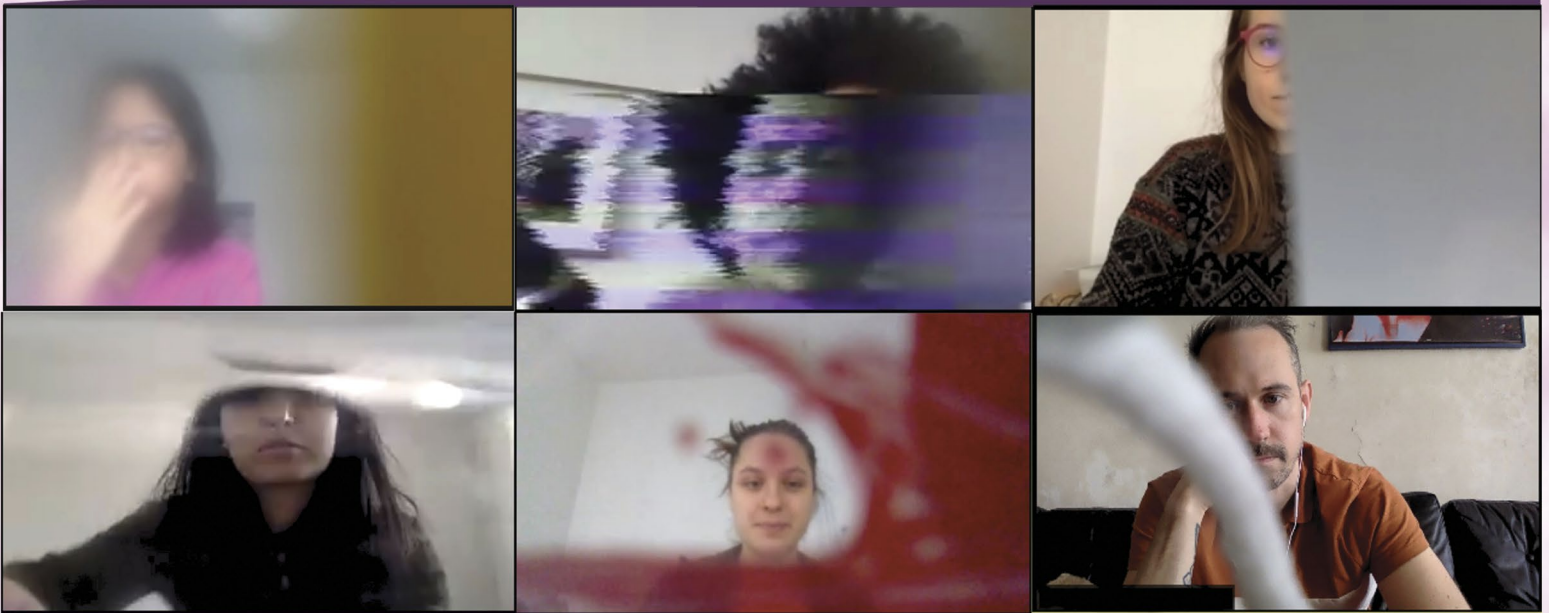


View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Bodies Not Against Each Other: Online Engagement Strategies for Improvisation

Michael O'Connor

Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz, Universität  
der Künste Berlin, Berlin, Germany



Examples of Zoom Ambiguous from Bachelor students  
at HZT, Berlin, Germany 2021.

## ABSTRACT

*Dance improvisation as an online course comes with practical problems. Students are forced to work in isolation, which can limit collective learning and make them feel disembodied. Focused attention in front of the computer screen can also cause fatigue for students. However, movement and creativity can still be the focus of an online dance course when assignments center on alternative forms of expression and sensing. Educators can offer formats that offer various methods of online interaction and invent new ways to strengthen performance skills that could be useful in a variety of circumstances. This article discusses the constraints online learning places on dance students, highlights specific assignments that can be done independently, and proposes how a neuroscientific definition of ambiguity can be used to lessen online exhaustion.*

While university dance departments in the United States were adapting their curriculum at the end of their spring semesters in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in Berlin, the semester was beginning. I was invited to teach a 12-week course to undergraduate students on exploring movement through improvisation at the Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz (HZT), the dance department that is part of the University of the Arts, Berlin. This class was for first-year students majoring in dance who had only spent one semester together in person before the pandemic. During that one semester, they took improvisation, but with a different teacher. Before the semester started, it was decided that the entire course would take place online so that we could plan and develop the course within the already precarious circumstances. Some students did not return to Berlin and were able to take the class from Japan, Turkey, or Portugal. Our only introduction with each other was online. Seeing the problems dance departments in the United States had to deal with that were associated with ending their semester unexpectedly online allowed me to design strategies from the start for embodied practices while working in isolation.

In Berlin, as in most large cities, living spaces are relatively small, and students often cannot move fully at home. In addition to space restrictions, other critical components of dance improvisation were lacking in an online environment, like sensing others and making choices in relation to others. Therefore, I wanted to create assignments so students could still train and strengthen skills in expression, nonverbal communication, and creative problem solving, and stay kinesthetically engaged with a format that allowed for less time in front of the computer. Various methods were used to ensure students felt connected during synchronous and asynchronous activities. Unique assignments, sharing formulated responses, and the technique of ambiguity were strategies for combating isolation and encouraging body–mind engagement.

## BOTTOM-UP ONLINE

When teaching improvisation, I believe in developing skills through a bottom-up approach. Bottom-up learning is learning in an incidental manner, through a specific activity, for instance. This means we learn to listen and respond with our bodies as our ears. Improvisation functions as a tool to expand and practice our potential for creativity and communication. A main goal I seek in improvisation is to bring our trained dance bodies together while not forgetting all of the cultural and social information our daily bodies carry. A bottom-up approach also means group exercises are prioritized over individual tasks, which demands group decisions, collaborations, and awareness of group dynamics. These goals appeared to be contrary to, or against, what was possible for students when attending the class alone at home. The word *against* has two definitions: (1) in opposition to, and (2) in physical contact with. Because students could not

dance together, I needed to find ways for the students to work with each other while not touching or being in proximity; in other words, to be bodies “not against” each other. My new goals were to minimize time spent online, diversify ways to interact while online, and provide unique tasks that stimulate embodied practices. The format consisted of one online lecture and one physical practice each week that students could accomplish independently.

The synchronous online lecture set the theoretical background for the week and sometimes included a short practice, a group discussion, and space for questions regarding that week’s physical assignment. The asynchronous physical assignment was comprised of two parts: physical practice and a written response. A group journal and a section for resources was also created online. The online group journal allowed students to pose questions after the online meeting and introduce additional topics. The group journal also provided a social element and allowed space for those who might not be comfortable speaking on camera to interact through writing. The resources section allowed myself and students to upload PDFs or links to materials that were relevant or associated with the week’s topic.

Assignments each week were designed so students could strengthen an aspect of performance, sense making, or creativity that could be used in the future when we were able to meet in person. In dance education, embodied exercises are not generally communicated as written assignments. In the field of visual arts, it is common to compress an assignment into a short sentence (Heijnen and Bremmer 2021, 25), which then allows educators or students to have more freedom to implement the instructions in their own way. For example, Oskar Maarleveld’s one-sentence assignment is “Make an impressive protest sign without text or recognizable representation” (Heijnen and Bremmer 2021, 136). The assignments discussed here, however, typically were written as paragraphs to seek clarity and nuance, as the students already had an abundance of freedom due to working alone and needing to be self-disciplined.

The first assignment was called “Alien Body”:

Start laying on the ground. Your goal is to get to standing and take one step. But, imagine this human body is foreign to you. You are like an alien that just got put inside this human. You don’t have any idea how it works. How do I get it to move? If you were born into an adult body, how does movement come from stillness? What do you move first? What is the logic you are creating? In the background of this task, you are a dance student knowing you need to pretend you don’t know how to use the body, you know where you are trying to end up, standing and taking one step. Also know what you shouldn’t know, if you were an Alien in this body. It becomes a mixture of imagination, suspension of truth, logic building, patience, and problem solving. Find a location to complete this task. Commit 30 to 60 minutes.

Although some students had very little space at home, others could take advantage of the online format and do physical practice in ways that would not be possible in the

classroom. For example, one student did an assignment requiring engagement with an object by dancing in the ocean, and a second student performed with her grandmother. For another assignment, an audio walk was created and given as an MP3 to the students. The students were guided to notice sounds, colors, and movements of other people as their walk became a research of the senses. In a different week, students were asked to listen to Steve Paxton's *Small Dance/The Stand* from *Contact Quarterly* and create a score for their own small dance to share. For this assignment, some students proposed scores for following insects as a small dance or created practices that could be performed while waiting for the bus, so small as to be undetectable by others. Other assignments I specifically designed or chose for this course included the following:

- Following a drag makeup tutorial without using a mirror.
- Researching songs that resonate with students and practice lip-syncing to them.
- Performing a Butoh score at home and writing a haiku.
- Memorizing a text that students could use in the future with movement.
- Photographing themselves as body sculptures in their house.

The lip-syncing assignment had both a solo and group version. In the group version, one dancer lip-synced to a song they chose while the other dancers on camera instantly tried to be backup performers. Supporting the singer allowed students to practice flocking even though online. Flocking is a common movement task for a group of dancers where one person leads with improvised movement and those standing behind them try to copy. In person, this exercise allows the leader to change without speaking when the group starts to face a new direction. While online and facing the camera, different students would take the lead in offering a way to frame or back up the lip-syncer and other students would instantly copy or flock. Although different than the traditional flocking exercise, the same skill set of listening and responding was needed. The students intuitively took turns practicing leading by initiating ideas and quickly following to support someone else's idea. As the class continued, students found ways to support the main singer by adding costume accessories or props, instantly changing the set, or copying the singer's actions. One song was played after another, so without time for preparation, students found immediate ways to use what was available to them to diversify each song. Students' empathic skills were heightened when trying to infer what their classmates were proposing nonverbally. Songs were chosen ahead of time by the students and sent to me so that during class they could be played from one computer. The songs were played randomly in an unknown order, so students were not sure if they were the next lip-syncer until they heard their song. The element of surprise required the students to listen carefully and commit fully.

After the students completed the physical practice for that week, they were asked to summarize the most important points, which we called a one-minute response. These responses were put online for everyone to read. Instead of free writing or explaining their experience, they were asked to isolate the most important points they learned from the experience. This might include what they discovered about themselves or what they believe should be stressed if they were to teach the practice. This required the students to make statements or identify belief systems and refrain from asking questions as responses. In the end, this written precision took much longer than one minute, but the term was kept as a metaphor for making concise and articulate statements. Solidifying statements that pinpoint what students gained from the exercise, positive or negative, helped highlight the significance of their experience.

The one-minute responses also fostered collective learning as the students could read what others had discovered. Classes in person allow students to see their classmates move and see the ideas and physical approaches each person offers. While working in isolation, students do not have access to the normal bottom-up learning that happens when interacting with their classmates in person in a dance class. With the one-minute responses, students could read what others found significant during their isolated exploration and see their classmates' insights and opinions. This substituted for what often happens in person when students verbally share their experience of an improvisation exercise or a final thought as class ends. Additionally, some assignments required all students to share documentation from the week's practice with their written one-minute responses, like a video, picture, or drawing. Shared personal insights and media documentation not only required the students to formulate what they wanted to share, but also deepened the collective learning for everyone. When the semester was over, the class assignments, responses, journal entries, and resources were exported, and a 155-page PDF was created and given to the students as an archive.

One advantage I found with an online course is the ability to respond to everyone equally as the instructor and for each student's potential to voice questions or responses with equal opportunity. Sometimes when class is conducted in person, different personalities can feel more comfortable speaking out loud, whereas others need time to digest or respond with more introspective styles. I noticed and appreciated that this format allowed everyone to be equally present in ways most comfortable for them, either speaking in online lectures, writing in online responses, or adding to the group journal. Some students also routinely contributed to class nonverbally through a concept introduced as Zoom Ambiguous.

## ZOOM AMBIGUOUS

At the start of the pandemic, meeting online was not common, especially for movement courses. A concern I wanted



Examples of Zoom Ambiguous from Bachelor students at HZT, Berlin, Germany 2021.

to address was the type of focus and exhaustion that comes from online meetings. Although some people feel connected through video interaction, the technology situates a body into muted, passive, and fixed states that can feel less connected and more disembodied.

In an article written by Manyu Jiang (2020) about Zoom fatigue, professor Gianpiero Petrigieri explained, “Our minds are together when our bodies feel we’re not. That dissonance, which causes people to have conflicting feelings, is exhausting. You cannot relax into the conversation naturally.” Petrigieri was also quoted in an online post by Steven Hickman (2020), “Zoom Exhaustion Is Real,” stating, “It’s easier being in each other’s presence, or in each other’s absence, than in the constant presence of each other’s absence.” The connected while disconnected paradox is tiring for anyone and is especially concerning for dance students, whose subject matter deals with the body in active, interpersonal, and expressive states.

During online meetings, we are, in a sense, constantly performing, as well as watching others perform. In his book, *Behavior in Public Places*, Erving Goffman (1963) detailed what we deem acceptable when our bodies are situated in lived scenarios, and he devoted a section to unfocused interaction. In “unfocused interaction, no one participant can be officially ‘given the floor’; there is no official center of attention” (Goffman 1963, 34). The expected acceptable behavior for online interaction is to appear focused and attentive. In reality, the visual stimuli of the other participants compete for attention, often resulting in unfocused interaction. As it is naturally a performative situation stuck between real and artificial, I proposed the concept of *Zoom Ambiguous* to the students. My idea was to question what expressive information is acceptable for students to give off while online. This proposal also allowed students to develop strategies to resist fatigue and exhaustion that comes from the stress of being on display amidst a lack of a central focus. Instead of approaching screen time with traditional codes of classroom conduct, this proposal sought to soften the hypervisual and simultaneously acknowledge the performativity the technology evokes.

Neuroscientist Semir Zeki (2009) proposed that ambiguity is a perceptual quality of the brain that interprets multiple meanings of incoming signals. “Perceiving is not therefore something that the brain does passively. Rather,

the brain is an active participant in constructing what we see” (Zeki 2009, 63). The type of perceptual ambiguity that is being described here is often exemplified with optical illusions. A classic example is of a vase in a silhouette that also looks like two faces looking at each other. The brain engages to “fix” what it sees. “Thus, a neurobiologically based definition of *ambiguity* is the opposite of the dictionary definition; it is not uncertainty, but certainty—the certainty of many, equally plausible interpretations, each one of which is sovereign when it occupies the conscious stage” (Zeki 2004, 175). Zeki also used Johannes Vermeer’s painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (c. 1665) to illustrate what he called higher levels of ambiguity. The girl sitting for the painting is described as “inviting, yet distant, erotically charged but chaste, resentful and yet pleased” (Zeki 2004, 189). The possibility for multiple and contrasting interpretations holds the viewer’s attention and makes the painting interesting. Between optical illusions of perceptual ambiguity and higher levels of performative ambiguity, students were invited to participate during online meetings by framing themselves in contradictory and unfinished ways, allowing for multiple interpretations of expressivity. The proposition was written as such:

Zoom Ambiguous proposes a solution to deal with Zoom exhaustion. How can you use the Zoom screen time as research for engagement on the space between attention and distraction, captivation and boredom, presence and absence? Pulling from Zeki’s (2009) explanation of ambiguity, “the artist exploits intuitively this potential of the brain that allows multiple areas to influence what is perceived. ... Images may acquire a richness through ambiguous visual signals that are not easily communicated or are inaccessible, through language” (92). Therefore, ambiguity is about creating a visual image on Zoom that is uncertain, confusing, or atypical and yet attempts not to be distracting. Ambiguity becomes a background practice, a way to manipulate tension without being tense. It becomes a practice of performance and a way to stay invested and entertain oneself among the two-dimensional boxes of talking heads.

Goffman (1963) explained that linguistic messages are considered voluntary, intended, and usually have an agreed meaning, whereas expressive messages are when the person giving off the message can “deny that he meant

quite what others claim he meant” (13–14). In other words, embodied, expressive messages have an element of ambiguity. Zoom Ambiguous allows students to be expressive while they are muted. It allows them to think creatively about image, background design, the body, framing, and the interplay between intended linguistic messages and indeterminate physical expressions. As Lakoff and Johnson (1999) pointed out, “Our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially on our bodies” (17). In this practice, the body brings into question what is real. The students played with the visual image on the screen and engaged with textures, lights, positioning of body parts, and depth. While watching their classmates in ambiguous states, their body as a perceptual system was hijacked, activated, and engaged.

Allowing students to view the online lecture time as performance research, in turn, engaged the areas of the brain and skill development we are usually lecturing about. As John Dewey (1934) pointed out in his book *Art as Experience*, the ability to sense qualities in our surroundings is equally as important as our ability to create and perform: “An artist, in comparison with his fellows, is one who is not only especially gifted in powers of execution but in unusual sensitivity to the qualities of things. This sensitivity also directs his doings and makings” (51). Training students to sense the border of attention and focus and venture into the world of what is ambiguous will directly influence their creative abilities. In practice, not every student used the invitation for Zoom Ambiguous each meeting. The center of attention felt balanced, and no proposal was too distracting.

## CONCLUSION

The approaches outlined here gave students iterative moments of practice and theory, allowing them to see and digest their classmates’ responses and online posts, which wove the reflections of one week into the next week’s responses. In this way, the incidental learning of being able to see each classmate’s thoughts or responses supported group learning despite students having done all the practices alone. The one-minute responses have the benefit for articulating a student’s experience in writing after any form of practice and is a strategy that I now carry into classes taught in person.

Although the fundamental interplay between dancers moving is lost in an online improvisation course, working in

isolation can feel less disconnected with the strategies outlined here. I also see value in these formats as approaches for courses about dance appreciation and introductions to dance for nonmajors, where creativity and the expressive body can be strengthened. General students might not feel comfortable participating in group dance classes, but alternative practices proposed here offer exposure to embodied creativity that can be done independently. The types of asynchronous assignments discussed in this article also allow for beginners and more advanced students to participate in the same course. Finally, when sense making and creativity development are a course’s goal, students from different fields could take advantage of an online course, uniting departments and generating inter- and transdisciplinary growth. ✍

## REFERENCES

- Dewey, John. 1934. *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Behavior in Public Places*. New York: Free Press.
- Heijnen, Erving, and Melissa Bremmer, eds. 2021. *Wicked Arts Assignments*. Amsterdam: Valiz.
- Hickman, Steven. 2020. “Zoom Exhaustion Is Real. Here Are Six Ways to Find Balance and Stay Connected.” *Mindful: Health Mind, Healthy Life*, April 20. Accessed January 31, 2022. <https://www.mindful.org/zoom-exhaustion-is-real-here-are-six-ways-to-find-balance-and-stay-connected/>.
- Jiang, Manyu. 2020. “The Reason Zoom Calls Drain Your Energy.” Remote Control: BBC, April 22. Accessed January 31, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200421-why-zoom-video-chats-are-so-exhausting>.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Paxton, Steve. “The Small Dance/Stand (audio).” *Contact Quarterly*. Accessed April 7, 2021. <https://contactquarterly.com/cq/rolling-edition/view/the-small-dance-stand-audio>.
- Zeki, Semir. 2004. “The Neurology of Ambiguity.” *Consciousness and Cognition* 13 (1): 173–196.
- Zeki, Semir. 2009. *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

---

Address correspondence to Michael O’Connor, Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz, Universität der Künste Berlin, Berlin, Germany. E-mail: [occonnor.michael.ryan@gmail.com](mailto:occonnor.michael.ryan@gmail.com)