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Ebb and Floorwork: Harmonizing the body with the floor to achieve *Flow*

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Dance

by

Leandro Glory Damasco Jr.

Thesis Committee:
Professor Lisa Naugle, Chair
Associate Professor Chad M. Hall
Assistant Professor Kelli Sharp

2020

DEDICATION

To

Palmera

Thank you for inspiring me everyday
and for encouraging me to pursue my MFA.

For

My Family and Friends

Thank you for being my biggest fans,
for always believing in me,
and for supporting me through my struggles.

and

For all my mentors, dance instructors, dance colleagues,
and to all who've I come across with around the world.

Thank you for paving the way for me.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Ebb and Floorwork: Harmonizing the body with the floor to achieve *Flow*

by

Leandro Glory Damasco Jr.

Master of Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Lisa Naugle, Chair

Ebb and Floorwork is a movement philosophy that investigates an active search for the flow experience through a movement floorwork aesthetic. By implementing and modeling the primary use of the floor after Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's conditions of *flow* my research asks: how does floorwork lead to a state of *flow* and enhance a dancer's training, how do different movement modalities help find effortlessness (a familiar sensation of flow), and does instilling a state of *flow* enhance the ability to do floorwork? This research is driven from my observations of many collegiate dancers having a disconnected relationship with the floor. My aim is to underscore how floorwork trains and stimulates a full body and mind activation, requiring dancers to be sensitive in the present moment and highly aware of their movement choices. It is in the *flow* state that I feel paves the way for dancers to be grounded, leading to optimal performance both in body and mind. Although the *flow* experience is subjective, Ebb and Floorwork gives a platform for dancers to deliberately find their own *flow* experience so that there is more room for conscious decisions and less stress as they perform.

INTRODUCTION

April 15, 2020, the world appears to be or is in a state of turmoil dealing with a global pandemic, the coronavirus. We are unprepared in this very real situation and can become easily overwhelmed, rendering an unhealthy state of mind and debilitation. I observe in myself and in others moments of anxiety for the unknown future ahead. As a dancer, choreographer and teacher, I think about the arts and, more specifically, about dancers and their continued training. Before the current situation with the coronavirus, many dancers shared their feelings of anxiety when approaching unknown experiences in the studio, rehearsals, and performance, where they may face immense physical and psychological challenges. To what extent can dance training provide an opportunity for dancers to learn to focus on the present moment, rather than be overwhelmed by an unknown future? In what ways can dance training support a self-practice that helps manage anxieties and provide skills so the dancer can meet the aesthetic demands for a performance? Learning skilled movement, healthy maintenance, and conditioning of the body may be accomplished through teaching approaches that help the dancer find new ways of balancing the mental effort with the corporeality of dance.

Having worked with many dancers throughout my dance career, I often observed a hesitancy and “disconnect” when it comes to floorwork. I define floorwork as continuous movement at very low and horizontal levels while finding transitions from standing to going to the ground for a prolonged period of time. Dancers would tell me they wish they had more training and understanding of approaching floorwork, but they have concerns of not being strong enough. This concern leads many dancers to be apprehensive, fear of getting injured, or looking foolish. When a dancer lacks the physical motor skills necessary for approaching floorwork with efficiency and pleasure, there is also a mindset that limits or obstructs one from working with the

challenge and being fully immersed with learning new action. While a hesitant dancers' concerns are understandable given that upright movement phrases dominate most dance training, rolling and other movement on the floor expands the dancer's skillset. How then can we help dancers overcome mental obstacles so that they can further their dance training?

Learning to become advance dancers requires many years of practice to develop body coordination, strength, flexibility and other skills. To achieve this goal, students of dance often study with different teachers who have various approaches. Anecdotal evidence that includes conversations with dancers, teachers and observation suggestions that beginning-level training often prioritizes standing or upright exercises and is not sufficient for advancing to higher levels. Beginning dance training that includes complex movement combinations characterized by alternating low levels in space may provide dance students with the skills to advance to higher levels of training. An educational bridge between a dancer's beginning and advanced classes may be supported by an aspect of what educational psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihayli terms as *flow*, a challenge-skill balance between action and awareness. Ebb and Floorwork, a practice that I have developed over the past eight years asks the dancer to actively engage with the flow experience in the execution of all movement with effortlessness.

Effortlessness in skilled performance is defined as a psychophysical state where movement flows automatically and flawlessly, free of excessive mental or physical effort (Dietrich and Stoll 159).

The floorwork aspect of this approach may also lead to a state of *flow* and enhance a dancer's training. It is in the flow state that will help alleviate the stressors of dance so that dancers can optimize their training in both mind and body and prepare them for any situation. We can accomplish *flow* by immersing ourselves into the floor. Floorwork helps dancers train their

cognitive functioning; that is, stimulate new pathways for learning, thinking, and problem-solving while developing new physical skills. Cognitive training improves and “provides structured practice on tasks related to aspects of cognitive functioning such as memory, attention, language, or executive function” (Farooqui 206). Ebb and Floorwork, therefore, is an active practice of both mind and body to find flow.

Stance of Researcher

As a former performer and resident choreographer with the highly physical and acrobatic dance company DIAVOLO, I recall the artistic director Jacques Heim often yells to the dancers, "they don't teach this in universities!" Although Heim never explained what he was referring to, the company members understood it as the "mental fight" necessary to do his choreography. From my perspective, Heim's genius was simulating chaos for his dancers with potentially dangerous architectural structures. Heim was interested in bringing out the human condition of surviving together and what it takes to conquer any obstacle or situation. Being physically fit and strong in mental stamina "saves" the dancer in Heim's choreography. In those rehearsals and performances, I learned "to survive" in unpredictable situations, that I must be steadfast, aware, and at the same time, calm. The seemingly hostile environment Heim purposely created during rehearsals and performance gave me an entrance to explore the immersion into the optimal performance I have come to know as the Flow State, which was popularized by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

As a current dance educator, I am interested in the *flow* experience, without the need to create hostile environments. I am also interested on how we can use floorwork to retrain dancers at both the physical and mental levels of dance by working through a series of skills that will help them to endure, what would otherwise seem beyond their physical limits, and be optimally ready

for the challenges in higher levels of performance and training. By designing, implementing and creating a movement practice, I considered the following:

- How does floorwork enhance a dancer's training?
- What pedagogical movement approaches help find effortlessness (a familiar sensation of *flow*)?
- Does instilling a state of *flow* enhance the ability to do floorwork?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

So, what is this thing called flow? I didn't know that it was called that back then, but my years of dancing for DIAVOLO produced the most for me. Each performing night required me to integrate with the stage and with the beautiful but dangerous architectural structures. I had to instantly activate a 360-degree awareness and have the ability to bend time in my own mind so I could do what was necessary for the choreography; to be where I needed to be and catch another dancing body from the sky. (personal journal, 01/26/20)

The state of *flow*, made accessible in 1975 by Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is described as “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time Flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost” (Gierland). In his 2004 TED talk, Csikszentmihalyi furthers to say that *flow* is the “secret to happiness” and his research has led him to interview hundreds of people (people of all walks of life) all over the world to find that *flow* is subjectively universal. That anybody can find *flow* in any activity because “when in flow, you are able to bring intention, energy, and skills to the present moment that not only bring everyday happiness, but also influence the future and help fulfill your potential” (Gregg 11). For the purposes of this thesis, and in conjunction with a floorwork aesthetic, I define *flow* as the path of least resistance (effortlessness) during physical and mental performance.

The book *Hardwiring Happiness*, written by clinical psychologist Rick Hanson, expresses that we can rewire the brain with everyday experiences for neural structures of confidence and contentment. Hanson further explains that “the science of experience-dependent neuroplasticity shows that each person has the power to change his or her [mentality] for the better” (Hanson 14). So, if we can find ways to enable the individual to be self-directed into their mindset and well-

being, then like *flow*, dancers can find “complete absorption or focus within challenging activities and an inner awareness of one’s peak motivational states” (Abernethy 96). This in turn will help “build up a lasting sense of ease, confidence, self-acceptance, kindness, feeling loved, contentment and inner peace” (Hanson 15). Inner peace, or rather the psychological state free of stress, alleviates the mind from expending physical or mental energy on tasks that impede the optimization of being at the present moment. The mind and body can then be in *flow* and put more effort into cognitive functioning, which is defined as the “multiple mental abilities, including learning, thinking, reasoning, remembering, problem solving, decision making, and attention” (Fisher et al).

The *flow state* can help dancers (or anyone for that matter) immerse themselves into a state of enhanced learning because “under conditions of undivided attention and enhanced cognitive bandwidth, performers process information more efficiently and more deeply than during normal learning” (Steenbarger 71). Before reaching such a state of learning, the mind must be primed and ready. If dancers can add cognitive training to their already existing dance practice, then dancers are allowing the mind and body to be immersed into a holistic experience. Jim Taylor writes in his book *Dance Psychology for Artistic and Performance Excellence*:

Some dancers hold misconceptions about the mental side of dance. They believe that mental abilities are inborn. That you either have them or you don't. But mental skills, and, as with technical skills, you can develop them. Therefore, you can approach mental skills in the same way that you approach the physical and technical parts of dance. In other words, if you consistently work on your mental skills, you will improve them, and your overall performance will benefit (Taylor, p.13).

Ebb and Floorwork physicalizes mental training tools such as “goal setting, imagery, relaxation, and self-talk – to build the mental skills, or psychological attributes that [we] want our [dancers]

to have – motivation, energy management, attention, stress management, and confidence” (Burton and Raedeke 40). It is these psychological attributes that share similar qualities of *flow* and therefore, we can investigate *flow* through designed practices that develop and improve mental skills such as “centering, a breathing technique used for producing physical balance and mental focus” (Nideffer 127). According to dance researcher Kate Hefferonan’s article “‘Just clicks’: an interpretive phenomenological analysis of professional dancers’ experience of flow,” many dancers have reported being in flow mainly when in performance because “concentrated attention and intense focus are key elements to the flow phenomenon and peak performance” (Hefferon 151).

According to Csikszentmihalyi’s research, there are several universal conditions that can induce *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 89). We can model any activity (such as a movement aesthetic) to achieve all, if not some of these *flow* inducers. The Ebb and Floorwork practice investigates the *flow state* by combining many of these conditions in one singular focus, that of floorwork:

- Balancing the challenge to skill ratio
- Creating clear goals and immediate feedback
- Concentrating in the present moment
- Merging action and awareness
- Losing self-consciousness
- Gaining a sense of control
- Distorting the temporal experience
- Being intrinsically rewarded

The floorwork aesthetic branches from historical dance ideas such as Martha Graham’s contract and release and Doris Humphrey’s fall and recovery technique. To perform any of these

techniques accurately, “dancers must train their body with a certain method and strict body discipline. So the body can become a technology and produce new knowledge products” (Rahmatika 67). When it comes to floorwork as a discipline, dancers must meet the challenges, such as the efficiency of descending and ascending from ground to standing, with an awareness of their current physical skills. Since “flow requires challenges, it must be supported by short-term stress (the good one) that assumes physiological protection to deal with challenges” (Cheron 1). Stress can be seen as immediate feedback as James Humphrey writes in his book *Stress Education for College Students*, that “stress is a pure motivational variable that energizes latent behavior tendencies” (Humphrey 77). When it comes to floorwork, banging your limbs on the floor or not moving as fluidly as you would like is instant information for cueing dancers to problem-solve, adapt, and modify to what is needed. A floorwork aesthetic that seeks *flow* by deliberately providing stressors and challenges can help dancers learn to control their consciousness and respond with confidence as they approach challenging situations, in this case the floor. As a result, the Ebb and Floorwork movement practice aims for the *flow experience* because “the best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (Csikszentmihalyi 3).

A Universal Experience

Flow is rooted long ago and “can be traced back to Eastern philosophy which urges the natural order of things...like a flowing river, and that we can best facilitate the flow by unblocking it and removing obstacles from its way” (Adams 145). The whole effort of humankind through millennia of history has been to capture these fleeting moments of *flow* and make them more a part of human existence, cultivating experiences which allow them to completely be or at least more “present” in the moment (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi 3). Such practices have supported optimal

performance training and clarity in daily life activities, including hardship and even survival. In his book *Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Performance*, author Steven Kotler writes that “training in high-stress situations increases what psychologists call ‘situational awareness’ which is the ability to absorb information accurately, to assess calmly, and respond appropriately... and heightened by flow” (Kotler 72). The concept of *flow* is not new as its mindfulness has its roots in early Eastern philosophy.

In Japan, *Mushin* (translated as "mind of no mind"), is a state where a person “empties” the mind of distraction, anxiety, ego, and fear; the mind is emptied enough to receive the truth instantly, the way a mirror receives your reflection as soon as you step in front of it (Veltri 77). This cognitive state and visceral experience are practiced widely among martial artists as a discipline to think spontaneously and to act quickly without strenuous thought. It is called no-mind because the goal is to achieve a focused yet fluid mindset and body, extinguishing the self-dialogue we have in our minds that usually accompanies our actions. “Mushin requires letting go. In order for awareness to flow uninhibitedly, one must let go of any physical or psychological tension, including doubts, worries, anxieties, expectations, deliberations, or ambitions” (Suler 175). This is crucial to a combatant fighting and parrying off the swords of opponent after opponent. As Zen Buddhist Takuan Sōhō points out that “if the mind stops before any one of these men, though you parry his striking sword, when the next man comes, the right action will have slipped away” (Sōhō 21). Sōhō further describes *Mushin* as a way to be one with weaponry as an extension of the mind and body:

When the swordsman stands against his opponent, he is not to think of the opponent, nor of himself, nor his enemy's sword movements. He just stands there with his sword, which, forgetful of all technique, is ready only to follow the dictates of the subconscious. The man has effaced himself as the wielder of the sword. When he strikes, it is not the man but the sword in the hand of the man's subconscious that strikes (Mindell 35).

In China, the practice of taking no action is called *Wuwei* and translates to as "effortless action" or "the action of non-action." Edward Slingerland, professor of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia, describes *Wuwei* as the "personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one's spontaneous inclinations without the need for extended deliberation or inner struggle" (Slingerland 7). *Wuwei* is expressed significantly in the Tao Te Ching, an ancient Chinese text written by Chinese philosopher Lao Tsu in 600 B.C. and sums up a fundamental principle of Daoism of doing less is doing more. *Wuwei* is often allegoric to water, where water will always find the open path for fluidity as the way nature does without forcing (Mason 280). This idea of being like water and having effortless action reminds us to be adaptive to any situation and find the least resistance to actions so that our minds are not engaged in mental activity that will in turn hinder or slow down responses. It is paradoxical but to achieve this state of *Wuwei* one must do without doing. To be clear though, "*Wuwei* does not mean doing nothing. Doing nothing connotes laziness, apathy, and a failure to complete a task. *Wuwei* is accomplishing the task with as little effort as possible, because if done correctly, little effort is all that is required (Simpson 41). This is the idea of training our minds so that our minds no longer direct our actions, as master swordsman Yagyū Munenori has written:

When you have exclusively learned the various practices and techniques and made great efforts in disciplined training, there will be actions in your arms, legs, and body but none in your mind; you will have distanced yourself from training, but will not be in opposition to it, and you will have freedom in whatever techniques you perform (Yagyū 75).

In India, it is called *Samyama*, which translates to "integration and or centeredness." *Samyama* is a state of deep trance and meditation and "the process of easily bringing the attention inward to stillness, inner silence, pure bliss consciousness, and the witness state" (Yogani 14). It is a state of mind yogis aim to achieve in their practice to find spiritual transformation and

mindfulness. Without the inner silence of letting go, such as *Samyama* often describes as the doorway to the movement of pure bliss consciousness, then we are already hindering ourselves from finding any effort in our thoughts and actions. Meditation increases your mental awareness, decreases your physiological tension, and moves you into an alpha state which gives you a continued access to *flow* itself (Lundstrum 162). It is this ongoing cognitive achievement I believe will help optimize dancers' awareness of themselves and their environment and introduce them to the Ebb and Floorwork practice.

These three eastern cultures, Japan, China, and India share the idea of achieving a state of mind to be optimally prepared for the experience in the moment. They are similar to Csikszentmihalyi's *flow*, although there are slight differences in achieving such a state. There are two ways of increasing the likelihood of a *flow experience*: (1) regulating environmental challenges to fit one's skills, as in games, or (2) self regulation of internal capacities to meet a greater variation in external demands. The disadvantage of the first approach is that flow remains situation-bound, relying on a given set of [external] environmental cues for its elicitation (Goleman 48). I argue for the latter, such that practitioners of *Mushin*, *Wuwei*, and *Samyama* do, that in changing your internal state you maximize your possibilities of entering a mental state of optimization without the need to be influenced by your environment. Thus, if we can get dancers in a state of *flow*, we can optimally prepare them for advance and challenging dance training

Floorwork and its Intrinsic Benefits

From a developmental perspective, the floor is crucial to the development of motor skills in children. Research has shown that those who crawl “show more advanced spatial knowledge than those without locomotion experience. This suggests that humans require such locomotor

experience before being able to perceive the spatial layout of the environment and that such experience is reflected in the child's sensory integration” (Ayres 1-10). As children, we practice rolling and crawling before standing up and these activities are ideal for preparing to stand, walk, and run (Franklin 132). In hindsight, our bi-pedal society provides less opportunities or need to move on all fours (hands and knees). Moving on all four requires total body activation and coordination of all our limbs. Four-point, or crawling, is a continual adjustment of the center of gravity and changes with each movement of the legs and the arms. The lift and placement of each arm and leg forms a complex motor sequence. It is a reciprocal bilateral activity, which “stimulates proprioceptors, which are important to brain organization” (Mays 44). Jan Erkert, choreographer, teacher, and author of *Harnessing the Wind: the Art of Teaching Modern Dance*, writes about the advantage of doing floorwork:

When the body is horizontal to gravity, it has the unique opportunity to return to its first movement memory. Revisiting its original blueprint, the body is fresh and receptive, just like a baby. The body has not linked the habit of raising the shoulders every time the leg moves. The floor provides opportunity to learn new motor pathways more efficiently. It is no mistake that so many somatic practices are based on floor work (Erkert 42).

Erkert also mentions that engaging in floorwork changes the functions of muscles depending on its relationship with gravity. For example, “the abdominal muscles may work, but do not have to contract when standing. When lying on the back, suddenly everything becomes work for the abdominal muscles because they have to fight gravity to do just about everything” (Erkert 41). In addition, maneuvering on all fours and at the low horizontal level may stimulate the parietal lobe. The parietal lobe is the critical area for the “perception and integration of sensory information, including heat, cold, pressure, pain, and the position of the body in space.” (Krasnow 82). Finding the *how* is integral to a dancer's learning to figure out what is most efficient and effortless for them as they move along on the floor.

In object-relations theory, Hungarian-born American psychiatrist Margaret Mahler describes that in early stages “the child develops a dim awareness of the need-satisfying object” (Hamilton 38). That the child starts to experience a form of symbiosis with the object, in many cases it would be the parent, the mother, and if the object does not continue to respond to the child’s needs, then the child’s genetically programmed ego functions fail to develop (Hamilton 38). In regard to dance, learning how to navigate the floor will help diminish the symbiotic need of a teacher or even the mirror (the object) to function. This puts more attention on the need of a connection with the floor and develops the awareness to move with the floor. Dancing in the horizontal plane eliminates the relationship with the mirror and at the same time the modeled teacher. The dancer is thrown into the infinite environment of the floor with no other but themselves and their own mental thoughts. Using the floor is then a perfect recipe for entering a *state of flow*.

Imagery as a primer to flow

Imagine you are the ocean tide, and when you are ebbing out from the shoreline, you are receding to grant yourself to see the bigger picture. You have a moment of seeing yourself and the entire world. You manifest the opportunity to visualize and design how you are going to flow back in. (personal journal, 04/16/19)

In her 2012 dissertation at Victoria University, *The Application of Imagery to Enhance “Flow State” In Dancers*, Eun-Hee Jeoung concluded that *flow* and relaxation imagery training was valuable techniques with the potential to enhance the experience of *flow*, as well as performance (Jeoung V). The use of imagery is an excellent way of improving mind and body awareness. It allows dancers to visualize with creativity and diminishes the self-consciousness so that the dancers can freely commit their bodily movements to their imagination. Having the

freedom to envision for themselves empowers dancers their creative interpretation and to move without worrying about being right or wrong as "imagery supplies a constructive focus in any transition from habitual mental patterns to pure presence" (Franklin 11).

Imagery furthers creativity and can pave the way for playfulness. In *The Importance of Play in Early Childhood Education*, author Marilyn Charles writes that "play is associated with many abilities in adaptive functioning, to name a few: divergent thinking, manipulation of ideas, and transferring objects into pretend objects" (Charles 21). Divergent thinking is a spontaneous, non-linear thought process, allowing one to freely think without fear of repercussion of possible solutions to a certain situation. This ability to divergently think and to produce creative ideas is essential to all people, including dancers in the moment of problem-solving in certain situations. Both are opportunities for joy and a myriad of other feelings, in relation to creative thinking to occur which directly correlates to the autotelic experience that *flow* produces. At its core, dancers dance because it brings them joy.

The metaphor can be seen as the language of the imagination. Dance in performance is typically in itself a metaphor for many things in life, encouraging the audience to use their imagination and experiences to associate underlying meaning and possibly purpose. "Metaphors typically carry with them an understanding of our corporeal being and corresponding bodily states (Lakoff and Johnson). The decoding and comprehension of a metaphor "demands great abstraction and great attentional effort—and, therefore, requires high levels of control and cognitive regulation—and that such control has been linked to executive functioning" (Carriedo). It would then seem that understanding a metaphor requires mental processing that's almost instantaneous and parallels the ideas of inducing one into a state of *flow*.

METHOD

I see the dancer's hesitation when she moves from an upright position to the floor, and it is as if I can feel the resistance pulsating through her mind. Her upper body seems to be foreign and lacks the strength she needs to support herself as she maneuvers from one form to another. Where is the flow? (personal journal, 02/22/20)

My research has led me to work with nine students that were of all levels of undergraduate dance majors from the University of California, Irvine. These students all have expressed wanting to learn and do more floorwork. To see if floorwork is universal at any level, I selected these students because they came from different dance backgrounds and training, such as ballet, modern, hip hop, or a mixture of all. Some of the participants have worked with me before in choreographic projects and some were totally new to the approaches of the Ebb and Floorwork practice. The methods used in this study provided a guided introductory level of Ebb and Floorwork and I understood that more practice and time is necessary for the dancers to fully grasp the training. The ideas and concepts addressed in the review of literature helped me delineate a practice that asks dancers to actively find *flow* in the execution of all movement. For this study, I introduced and used three pedagogical movement concepts that provided the *flow* conditions of Csikszentmihalyi's research. I used imagery, positive/negative space, and decentralization to promote a more focused and relaxed state of mind so that the dancers can engage creatively and develop, without excess anxiety, effortlessness. These movement approaches were then transferred to floorwork for added complexity to emphasize the training of action and awareness of movement in task-oriented exercises. The overall goal is to amplify awareness and find that effortless sensation of flow both in the mind and body.

Positive and Negative Space

To warm up the dancer's attention and awareness of themselves in the space, I started the Ebb and Floorwork practice with the movement concept of positive and negative space. In *Principles and Designs*, I used Wong's term to define positive space as what surrounds a negative form and negative space as what surrounds a positive form (Wong 109). In the context of dance, positive space is anything of physical form such as the body, the floor, and any other object. My first instruction with the dancers was to give them opportunities to explore negative space all around themselves. A specific example: negative space between two fingers when creating the peace sign, negative space under and above a table, and negative space between each other. I explained that positive and negative space is something we may all be attentive to since we go through our daily lives, walking and driving into negative space, so we don't crash into anything. The nine dancers responded with acknowledgment; however, it was clear that they were curious about how to create positive and negative space and why that would be relevant in finding any *flow*. After explaining to the dancers that it is more than just moving in and out of positive and negative space and that the practice is to be intentional about actively defining, designing, and creating negative space so that positive space can flow through, they seemed to understand. The dancers started to follow-through their negative space with more intention and attention, and students have expressed that it was almost automatic finding the next negative space.

To see if positive and negative space can help enhance a dancer's learning abilities, I continued to work with positive/negative space by demonstrating a movement phrase. I challenged the dancers to learn it, not by the actual movement but by the explicit direction of what would be considered the negative I was going through. The goal was to encourage dancers to learn movement, not by the actual action (which dancers tend to want to do it precisely like the

demonstrator), but to find the pathways of negative space I took. I wanted to reinforce the idea that the Ebb and Floorwork practice is not meant for the dancer to move as I do, but to encourage the dancer to find the movement pathways that work effortlessly for them.

I offered time for everyone to explore this idea individually. We did this in a circular format where one dancer would be in the center of the circle, allowing the opportunity for the dancers around the perimeter to observe how other dancers approach the positive and negative space exercise. I also instructed the dancers, who were observing, to notice the pathways of the dancer practicing in the center so they can strengthen their ability to see all possible positive and negative space. I wanted to get the dancers to a point where they do not need to physically see with their eyes where their positive and negative space is. I wanted them to build upon their total awareness, which is “a state of having a 360-degree focus of attention, outward and inward, (an experience often described when being in flow) where we are present to our surroundings without being preoccupied (Ellenberg 125).

To further investigate the idea of positive and negative as an approach to find effortlessness, I randomly partnered dancers together to go across the floor while filling each other’s negative space. First, partner A is to go across the floor however they want, knowing that Partner B’s task was to fill in partner A’s negative space with their positive space as they move freely across the floor. There are two aims for this: 1) Can you recognize and establish a foresight of your partner’s movement patterns, so you do not have to think heavily on where to go next? 2) Instead of waiting for an established positive and negative space to situate, can you anticipate the positive and negative space before it is created and already pass through it in some predictive *flow*?

By this time, the dancers are intensively layering all the ideas of positive and negative space. I then wanted to finalize it by directing the dancers to apply the principles to the ground and

with floorwork to see if the movement concepts aided them in their approaches to floorwork. I disclosed to them that Ebb and Floorwork is more than just rolling around flat on the floor and that the practice seeks a flow of pathways so we can move on the floor for extended and sustained periods. The dancers now understood that the floor is virtually the only constant positive space, and with that, they can create any shape in motion with their bodies. They all tested this theory by lunging out and connecting their feet to the floor and confirmed that it created negative space. They were now more aware of the infinite possibilities their movement choices could make. It was now just a matter of speeding up their body with their minds so they can flow and develop an intuitive awareness of some of the outcomes of what would come next, giving them the ability to foresee and choose without too much thought.

Decentralization

A different movement concept I introduced to the dancers was the technique of decentralization which was coined and created by choreographer Alwin Nikolai, stating that “with the awareness of decentralization, one could now place the origin of force in or on any surface of the body, even a pinpoint of flesh” (Nikolai and Louis 11). I adapted Nikolai’s decentralization in two different ways: the first as the point of origin that any positive space (any body part) has the potential to pivot, shift, and/or revolve. The second approach was to decentralize our awareness of the many points in our bodies. How shifting the mind between those points can reveal that there are several different ways to achieve the same movement without the need to always do it the same way. The goal for using decentralization is to give dancers a sense of control of where they want to emphasize and or concentrate in their movement choices. For example, you can initiate a simple

butt roll, by either reaching your hand down first, twisting of the torso, or by collapsing behind the knees first.

To practice the first way of decentralization I instructed the dancers to choose a single point on their own body that could then become the through line of any movement pathway. This was an open, improvisatory session with occasional suggestions from me guiding them to find positive and negative space while decentralizing the body point. There was instant feedback from the dancers. I observed they were more focused maintaining that single point as a through line of their movement pathways. I then invited the dancers to change the decentralized point (which caused them to shift their weight) and see if it can be instantaneous without too much thought. I did this by connecting the idea that the floor can also be seen as one big decentralized point that a dancer can shift, pivot, and revolve around. This was to paint the picture that like how our limbs have so much mobility and potential connected to the torso; our entire body is like a huge limb connected to that of the floor. With this in mind, the dancers can explore the idea that we are just an extension of the floor, as the floor is an extension of our moving bodies.

I demonstrated the second idea of how I use decentralization by performing an existing warm up phrase that they have all learned before on the floor and asked them if they could identify the decentralized point. I made sure that I was clear externally and physically in the movement and the dancers all agreed that they could see the exact points and body parts that I used to initiate, pivot, and revolve. I then performed the phrase once again, the exact same choreography and asked if they saw any differences. I was not surprised by their puzzled responses and I knew they wouldn't see it at first because internally I decentralized my awareness on different body parts to accomplish the exact same movement. To further explain this, I took the simple move of a butt-roll and asked them what comes up first in their minds when approaching a butt-roll or if they

think of anything at all? What initiates first? Does that specific point have to initiate first? The dancers replied with different responses from thinking about their placement of hands, or the lunging of their legs, to the spiraling of the body to the floor.

I expressed to the dancers that “dance is ephemeral, ‘in-between’ shrouded in all sorts of manifestations that lends specific points of memory and pose a great challenge” (Klein 98) and that it is this challenge to take our dance training to a high level of spontaneity so that we are mentally prepared to adjust and modify when necessary without stressing if it is right or wrong. I explained to the dancers that our environments are ever changing whenever we dance, that the way we move, the way we feel, or the way we interact with our environments are never the same. So, to stay efficient we need to build an awareness that the way we perform or execute our movements will depend on the present moment, realizing that we cannot centralize our minds to one way of doing.

To combine the two approaches, I then used decentralization in conjunction of using the floor and decided to use more familiar vocabulary and movement phrasing. I first asked the dancers to perform what a chaine-jete looks like. I acknowledged their actions and told them how it was interesting to see how the dancers had an immediate physical shift in their bodies as if the only way to prepare for a chaine-jete movement was to compose oneself into the ballet aesthetic, with arms in specific port de bras and legs at the ready, turned-out and with one foot in a tendu position. This brief moment demonstrated to the dancers how often we have a centralized mindset to movement and was apparent to one dancer (who primarily focuses on ballet technique) says that it is just automatic for her whenever she is engaging in any kind of technical movement and is hard for her to break away from. I responded that “this is exactly the point,” to have a decentralized

mindset, so that even movements we have trained in one way for so many years is not hindering other possibilities of performing it.

Continuing on, I then proceeded to ask the dancers on how they would now perform a chaine-jete while on the floor. This immediately took time for dancers to think about doing and they all performed a version of their own on the floor but felt unconfident in their performance. I quickly suggested to them to analyze what makes a chaine-jete a chaine-jete. Decentralizing the execution and not relying on the aesthetic look of what a chaine-jete is. As a group, we took the time to discuss that the first move, a chaine, is really just a circular whole-body revolution at the vertical axis and that we use this chaine to generate momentum. To perform a jete, is to throw. So now it was a matter of how we revolve our entire body on a floor and prepare it to give the illusion of being thrown or of throwing oneself.

I showed them my version of a chaine-jete (going to the right) and broke down the rotation at the anatomical vertical axis. I found points on the floor and my body (the upper back) that would assist me as the decentralized area to turn and rotate at the low horizontal level. The dancers agreed in their observation as I performed it that my version of a chaine on the floor looks and feels like how they would do a chaine standing up. I then said that to achieve enough height to throw my leg I had to provide enough negative space underneath myself so that when I was just about to finish the movement of the chaine I was already prepared to brush and straighten out my leg in the jete. To do this, I discussed that I planted my right shoulder and the availability of my hands and forearms to provide a brief moment of support and lift in where I can now perform the jete.

The dancer's seemed amazed by how seamless, quick, and precise I was able to descend and lift off from the floor with minimal effort. I reminded them that it was not about having the necessary strength to perform such movements, like the chaine-jete, on the floor (although it does

help), that it was finding and understanding for themselves that as we train to perform movement in all its variations, on and off the floor, requires that decentralized principles of constantly choosing and adapting points on the body as initiators of action and mind.

Analogous Movement Training

The third practice is what I call analogous movement training and it allows dancers to have a distinguish goal of moving like something they can imagine. An analogy is a comparison of two things and combining it with the use of imagery gives freedom to the dancers to interpret how they would like to move with no thought or concern of doing it wrong. This in turn will boost their confidence to choose however they want to perform on or off the floor. Through my sessions and short interactions with the dancers I often used the imagery of a river going downstream as a metaphor for *flow*. A river going downstream will always find the path of least resistance and for this study we want to be able to find that effortlessness in our movement choices.

How can I get dancers to move and not worry and be present in the journey? When presented with an obstacle such as a rock, water maneuvers effortlessly around without the need for a second thought. (personal journal, 03/07/20)

I described to the dancers a brief warm-up exercise called puddling and it is exactly what it sounds like, it is to be as a puddle. I instructed them to find any shape that is most comfortable and flat on the floor as if they were like a puddle, undisturbed and calm in its entirety. I demonstrated and told them that I am a tummy sleeper and enjoyed starting flat on my stomach directly connected to the floor. I then said that the mind is like a puddle, when calm, it exists undisturbed and relaxed. I reiterated to the dancers to be in a puddle shape that is the most comfortable for them, so comfortable that they might fall asleep in it but that we will avoid that by immediately being active and tuning into our breath in that shape.

As we give into the floor, allowing gravity to receive us, and letting the weight of our muscles and bones drip to the ground, I explained to the dancers that the breath is our native ebb and flow. Our inhales and exhales rise and fall, it will always be there but will graciously give up its control if you need to consciously breathe. Choreographer and functional anatomist Irene Dowd notes that “paying attention to your breathing without controlling it requires a high degree of concentration. It is easiest when you don’t have gravity to deal with” (Dowd 16). I continue to instruct the dancers to analyze how their breathing on the floor gives a different sensation as opposed to standing. Is there a difference? Is it more effortful? I reassured them that the breath will always be there and like water will adapt as much as it can to the shaping of your body.

I then described a droplet of water falling into their bodies and how that may ripple through your puddle, instructing them to shift to another comfortable shape on the floor of their liking. Continuing to be aware of their breath as they change and to notice any differences. I then invited the dancers to continue shifting and ripple into different shapes on the floor at their own timing and to eventually maneuver so that the separation of shifts is not noticeable. I reminded them to navigate through the positive/negative space, the cracks and openings that will always be there as you move. Allowing the body to mold itself continuously without effort. Keeping the ebb and flow of the breath I then encouraged the dancers to find additional support for their arms and legs, paving opportunities to be in configurations of all fours and lifted away from the floor. The dancers continued and eventually worked with the puddle on the floor into movement sensations that made them fully erect and standing and I then asked them how they felt. One dancer calmly described her experience as a meditation and that although she was fully active, she understood the analogy of being like a puddle, existing, undisturbed and ready to ripple into motion.

Another analogy I often used to get dancers out of overthinking is to draw circles on the floor with their bodies continuously. In many Zen teachings, “the circle is infinite” and describes the way of doing things and the pathway we should take, according to the Tao (Glassman 7). The goal of this practice is to flow action continuously in one direction. The idea of drawing circles throughout the negative space is an effective analogy that the dancers all agreed to provide a continuity of action. I then reminded them that in a three-dimensional space, a circle could cross over multiple planes, which then may or may not look like circles anymore. However, the feeling of a continuous line of motion will still be apparent. It is this constant motion that will remind dancers to keep going, and that even if they mess up, there’s no time to worry as it in the past.

I asked my dancers to always find the circles in their movements, even with actions that appear legitimately just a straight line that has an end point, like that of a spoking of the arm or the brushing of the leg in a jete. I reminded them that from point A to point B may be the quickest but not necessarily the most efficient. We want to be present in the moment as much as possible and find effortlessness without thinking. I demonstrated this simply by going down to the floor and back up on the floor, that I often never find a straight line to my destination, that with the help with gravity and the momentum generated by the spiraling action of my body I do not need much more effort than choosing the direction I want to know. There is a reason we say “just go with the flow.”

FINDINGS

I remember when I wanted to quit my first professional dance opportunity. I wasn't ready nor was I taught to handle the amount of pressure and stress. I wanted to leave. I compared myself to others. It was only when I made the choice I was meant to be there, and I had something to offer that I found what worked for me and it saved my dance career. (personal journal, 03/04/20)

The purpose of this study was to investigate the flow experience through movement training that challenges the dancer's mind and body. The process of designing and implementing the ideas of *flow* considered the following questions:

- How does floorwork enhance a dancer's training?
- What pedagogical movement approaches help find effortlessness (a familiar sensation of flow)?
- Does instilling a state of flow enhance the ability to do floorwork?

The first question was addressed throughout the literature review, comparing floorwork to the likeness of the *flow* characteristics and the benefits that floorwork provides for the dancer. The act of doing floorwork requires an awareness that is comparable to getting into a *flow experience*. In sports psychology, *flow* is often distinguished as peak performance, which is “used to describe one's highest level of performance” (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi 11). Also, floorwork is physically involved, asking practitioners to return to their first movement memory of crawling and rolling. Like how babies use the floor to develop essential motor skills, the reintegration with dance exploration on the ground will also help build new motor pathways for the dancer. Therefore, I believe that floorwork does enhance a dancer's training.

Due to the pandemic, I was unable to have more than two sessions with the dancers and implement additional movement exercises that modeled Csikszentmihalyi's conditions of flow and

see any substantial amount of progress. However, with the limited time I had with the dancers there were still some findings. I still had to go with the *flow* of my study.

One of the findings was that I found myself demonstrating a lot of the concepts of positive/negative space and decentralization. This was interesting because these movement approaches were meant to give dancers the effortless freedom to execute movement the way they wanted to. I took it with the understanding that they just don't train in this way of involving their minds deliberately with the actions of their movement simultaneously. Teacher demonstration has been a fundamental way a dancer learns, and it is important to acknowledge but does lend fascinating insight with my methodologies. Always looking for a demonstrator builds dependency and may lead to a conscious mapping of what is right or wrong when doing a certain task, producing hesitancy if they felt like they weren't performing the tasks correctly.

Additionally, looking for demonstrations lets me know that dancers are relying heavily on their visual sense of the concepts as opposed to embodying them holistically with all of our sensations to channel both body and mind. It might be difficult to say they understood the concepts and could actually transfer them to their creative practice or if they just copied me. In hindsight, however, I realized that the dancers still invested a lot of their focus because of my demonstrations. They were involved in the process and seeing them trying to do it exactly as I do show concentration and awareness in the present moment. Essentially, they were in a *flow* of learning from demonstration. So, if dancers find effortlessness to have a demonstrator, as a learning tool, then I indirectly used another movement, or rather, teaching approach to get them into a *flow experience*.

The positive/negative space concept was meant to guide dancers to develop a whole-body awareness of themselves in space. Knowing every inch of your negative space as you move should

pave the way for effortless movement because you know how to maneuver in and out with your positive space without too much thought. I noticed; however, they closed their entire bodies multiple times, limiting the opportunity to negative space around them. I encouraged them to think about creating opportunities for negative space for themselves by asking them to think of connecting a positive space with another positive space. I showed them an example of lifting my hand and placing it and combining it at my hip which creates an opening or hole. And the dancers immediately saw how clear the negative space was between my arm and the side of my torso just from the connection of my hand to my hip as opposed to when that same arm was just hanging unconnected on my side. I wanted the dancers to realize that the floor is just one big surface of positive space and it did not matter how they move their body along the floor, because they are always connecting their positive space with the positive space that is the floor.

One dancer shared with me and to the group that as an observer, she understood when I demonstrated flowing in and out of my positive and negative space and using decentralizing. She saw how clear I was in creating the negative space for the observer's eye to see and how I was decentralizing my points of contact with the floor. Still, she confessed that it was challenging because it was hard for her to identify the negative space that she created consciously without the need to look at it physically. She then said exactly what I am trying to solve with the positive/negative space concept and realized it is a common thought for many inexperienced dancers. She said, "I just get too caught up in my head, and I don't think I have the upper-body strength for it." Now the interesting thing is, however, when we applied the positive/negative space to navigate the floor, another dancer commented that she discovered that she found more possibilities of circling, decentralized movement, and creation of negative space when she was on all-fours versus when she was upright and bipedal. She further explained that with the floor she

could actively engage with gravity and literally go into a whirlwind of movement choices and possibilities without worrying where she was going. So, for her, and maybe not for others, applying the concepts of positive/negative space and decentralization with the floor took her to a place that resembled a little *flow experience*. This is just an indicator that dancers learn to grasp concepts at different levels and speeds but does give light that positive/negative space and decentralization can help find effortlessness for some.

Through discussion, all dancers have expressed how much they want to be good at floorwork. Some dancers saw it as an investment to their movement versatility as many of the seniors do want to dance professionally someday. This indicated to me that there is an intrinsic reward for them to be comfortable in immersing themselves with a challenge and that floorwork was advanced movement training for them. One dancer had mentioned that she had a very constricted relationship to the floor. Rather than conceiving it as a constant partner in her work, she maintained a superficial relationship, dancing “above” it and only yielding when necessary. It is apparent, however, that the dancers have the tenacity and skill to match the challenges of the floor. They are all beautiful movers already and it was a matter of continued practice and training in a way they are not used to. And with the floor, as simple and stagnate the ground appears, movement is never the same, providing endless challenges for dancers to overcome, which is one of the exact conditional recipes for entering a *flow* state.

To address the amount of effort that is necessary to perform tasks efficiently, I found that the constant reference of being like water going downstream was effective and oftentimes needed for the dancers to visualize and maintain attentiveness to the methods. Suggesting that giving attention to imagined metaphors helps dancers feel unconditionally empowered and allows permission to expand new thought patterns and creativity without consequence. Although

unpracticed, I observed that the dancers felt enlightened and started to understand why I used the concepts such as positive and negative space and decentralization, with many of them expressing how much they want to be more comfortable with themselves when it comes to the floor in general. My assessment is that they gained a mental shift and saw it as a useful component to help them achieve with confidence at least a new approach to working with the floor. It is with this newfound confidence I wanted to give dancers so they can see, predict, move, and problem-solve in any situation.

I was only getting started. I was excited to share the breadth of knowledge I have gained by simply just dancing the floor. Then the world literally flipped upside down, but even that presented just another opportunity for me to hone into my own practice. (personal journal, 03/25/20)

I can't confirm if they ever reached a state of *flow* with the minimal time I had with the dancers because it is such a subjective experience. I do thoroughly believe with continued practice; the dancers can find a version of *flow* for themselves with the simple ideas of positive and negative space. The simple feedback of continued interest to navigate the floor from the dancers, and the comments of their relationship with the ground slowly moving away from having anxiety, was enlightening information. They were letting me know that the methods at least instilled an awareness of different approaches that they can use when doing floorwork.

CONCLUSION

What feels like you're in flow? Well when you're in love right? Love is infamous for the ebb and flow of emotional experiences. I had planned the choreography to represent efforts of going with and against flow and the cognitive effects it may have through three different memories of relationship experiences.

It is these memories that would illustrate on stage our tendencies to worry about the past or the future and what it takes to snap into the present. It is like going upstream, the struggle is real. When a memory fights to be forgotten and you're holding on to remember. You're often told to just let go. (personal journal, 05,03/20)

Although this study and practice of Ebb and Floorwork cannot guarantee a dancer to enter a state of *flow*, it gives a platform for dancers to think differently and to be more present and aware of their movement. The floor brings out unique challenges as most dance training does not utilize it as the main method of teaching. I believe that this notion suggests a secondary frame of mind and is noticeable when dancers are presented with floorwork opportunities. This idea creates an unfamiliar territory, providing an achievable yet challenging environment for dancers, requiring mental and physical capacities to work cohesively, possibly paving a way for a *flow experience*.

By combining the three methods of positive/negative space, decentralization, and analogous movement training I guided the dancers to seek effortlessness in their practices. I wanted them to obtain an endless stream of unconscious movement with the ability to be spontaneous and adaptable to any outcome that may have suddenly changed. So much so that they have forgotten that they are doing anything with the ground because they are in a *flow experience*. Just like the ideas of *Mushin*, mind of no mind, which isn't the absence of the mind but a way to act in a world where you are totally involved, yet not clingy or worrying about the outcomes of our choices and

actions. It was stimulating to see the dancers start to tune into not just their corporeal identity but also put effort to their thought processes.

Ultimately, the Ebb and Floorwork practices were developed to enhance the training of dancers of all levels of dance backgrounds. The *flow experience* is universal and can aid in the optimization of a dancer's training and learning ability. By finding effortlessness, a sensation of *flow*, dancers relieve their minds from hindering themselves to perform and can enhance the ability to do floorwork. I stand firm that floorwork training is essential and can greatly improve mental and physical embodiments of the practicing dancer. The interests from dancers wanting to be more versatile and good at floorwork is intrinsically rewarding enough for me to continue researching the ideas of *flow* through Ebb and Floorwork.

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