

Riding the Wave of Intensity

Lene Bonde

ABSTRACT

“Riding the wave of intensity” is a paper about flow and dance. It is based on a written assignment about my teaching practice at the Ingrid Jespersen School in Copenhagen, where I taught a group of 20 youngsters from 12–13 years of age. In my work as a dancer and teacher I have always been interested in a state of being in which you are completely focused and concentrated. The liberating, self-forgetful feeling fills your body and this activity is all that matters. I became aware of this state particularly during this teaching practice. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes this state as *flow* in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* from 1990. My motivation for writing this paper is to share my experience about flow and dance and furthermore to give concrete inspiration on how to achieve flow in dance classes.

SAMMENDRAG

“Riding the wave of intensity” er en artikel som omhandler flow og dans. Artiklen er baseret på en opgave, som jeg skrev i forbindelse med min praktik periode på Ingrid Jespersen Skolen i København, hvor jeg underviste 20 børn i alderen fra 12–13 år. I mit arbejde som danser og underviser har jeg altid været interesseret i den tilstand, hvor man er fuldt ud fokuseret og koncentreret. Den befriende, selvforbyggende følelse fylder kroppen, og det er kun den ene handling, som har betydning i øjeblikket. Jeg blev specielt interesseret i tilstanden kaldet *flow*, som først er beskrevet af Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi i hans bog *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* fra 1990, i løbet af min undervisnings praktik på Ingrid Jespersen Skolen. Min motivation for at skrive denne artikel er at dele mine erfaringer omkring flow og dans, og endvidere at give konkret inspiration til at fremkalde flow i dansetimer.

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Introduction

Aksel and Jesper¹ follow each other. They have the exact same timing and their bodies are spinning in to and out from each other. Their duet is very dynamic and all of a sudden there is a natural pause... They await every single movement and when one of them takes initiative to begin a new movement, the other impulsively follows. It is not possible to see which of the boys' solo they are dancing or who is in charge. They are using their bodies in many different ways: turning, jumping, rolling on the floor and letting go of their own bodyweight so the other one can catch it. They are using their bodyweight to slide on the floor. They are balancing and crawling through the different bridges they shape with their bodies.

It is nine o'clock on a Wednesday morning. There is an intensive atmosphere in the gym hall, and the sun is shining through the big roof windows. The students in class 7b are becoming more comfortable with the structure of my dance class, and they are happy when they recognize some of the exercises. I had been very excited to see how a group of youngsters would approach the task: to make a friendship duet. It requires them to trust each other, share their bodyweight and learn each other's solos. They are laughing and making a lot of noise but they are concentrated at the same time. To them this is a game about sticking close to their partner. The students work constructively and focus on taking their starting point from a large piece of paper, which I have hung on to the gym wall. On the paper I have written the structure of their friendship duet. We call the paper our 'dance recipe'.

Aksel's and Jesper's eye contact is strong and they are not noticing the other students in the room. They are not really talking together. They do so only once in a while but only with very short and precise sentences. They speak and recognize each other's ideas with their bodies. They are very similar to each other in their body language, although they are very different boys. Jesper is tall, slender, with dark hair. Aksel is small, grounded and blonde. It is as if the two boys built an imaginary bubble of energy around themselves. The only external factors that influence them are the music and my voice. I commend their effort. Sometimes I interrupt the boys asking questions that make them clarify or develop their movement.

By the end of the class the students show each other their friendship duets. Many of the students are impressed by Aksel's and Jesper's duet. After the class Aksel asks Jesper if he would like to practice the dance again. The two boys dance again completely ignoring the school bell which rings to announce the break. Why have Aksel and Jesper caught my attention among the 20 students? How can I describe the intense energy that appeared between the two youngsters?

F.F.F – Flow Forming Factors

While teaching at the Ingrid Jespersen School in Copenhagen I become very fascinated and interested in a state, which I often observed among my students. This was a state in which they became so engaged in the creative process that they forgot the time, people and world around them. They were fully focused and concentrated. It seemed like a liberating self-forgetful feeling filled their bodies. This optimal state of being has been of interest to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi since the beginning of the 90s. Csikszentmihalyi uses the word flow to describe this state of being. He describes

1 Aksel and Jesper are invented names to protect the privacy of the boys.

flow as a positive and focused state, where humans are so engaged in an activity that everything else seems unimportant. Flow is a fundamental concept in positive psychology and is used in various fields such as management, organizational development and pedagogy. Csikszentmihalyi presented his theory about flow for the first time in his book: *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* from 1990. (Ørsted Andersen, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 2005).

Flow can be an individual experience that is achievable in many different situations. The optimal experience of flow can also be experienced in groups where all members are in the zone of flow because of their common work processes. The feeling of flow can also appear as an observable intensity or atmosphere in a room. In my teaching practice I find that there are various factors that help to create flow:

- A clear framework

Clear and concrete *structure* helps the practitioner to work without worrying about different practical issues, such as: “When do I have to finish?” and “Who am I going to work with?”

- A focused task

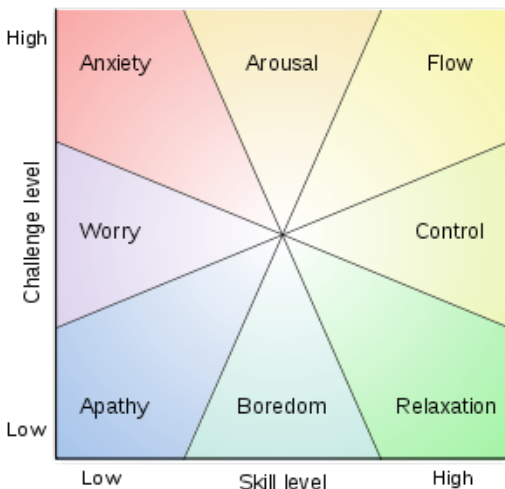
It is important for the practitioner to know what the purpose of the assignment is. It creates commitment and makes the assignment manageable.

- Balancing skills and challenges

It is vital that the challenges and the skills of the practitioner are on the same level. Too big challenges can create stress and something opposite to flow: boredom. The connection between skills and challenges and how it affects an individual's mental state are depicted in the model shown below. The model is from Csikszentmihalyi's book: *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (1997).

- Guiding

The appreciation of the practitioner's work is very important because it encourages and motivates her or him to carry on or work even more in depth with the given task. It is essential that the teacher guides the students by *asking questions* like: “What do you have to do with your body to turn around twice?” or “Yes that is good, but is it possible to do the movement backwards?”



- An undistruptive work environment

In order to achieve the mental state of flow where you forget time and place, it is significant to work with full focus on the task *without interruptions*. As a teacher you can try to avoid interruptions like phones ringing or loud talking, but it is almost impossible to avoid all interruptions for a longer period of time.

When I look back at Aksel's and Jesper's creative process when working with the friendship duet it is clear to me that most of the above-mentioned factors were present during the class. The boys had amazing shared timing; they really felt each other and moved like one body. Their sensitivity to each other had to do with the structure of the task they were given. They both had to contribute material from their individual solos. I let all the students work with the same partner throughout the whole class allowing them to establish a strong connection with their partners. Because they followed our dance recipe they had a clear structure to work from and knew the purpose of their task. They had one clear goal: to create a friendship duet. There was a good balance between the students' dance skills and the challenge level of the task. I made sure that the movements were not too difficult by letting them create the steps themselves. Aksel and Jesper were both inexperienced within dance. When they had to learn each other's solos, neither of them was bored or unsatisfied with themselves because they experienced both challenge and satisfaction in achievement. Every time I could see that they were about to stop I made sure that there were always new challenges for them. This way of guiding is important to enable the students to stay in the zone of flow: they need constant challenges, help or appreciation.

Intensity – Listen to Your Body

When I work with dance I often work with the word intensity. How can I be so sure that intensity is present? Intensity can be complex to measure or label but it is a very clear feeling. In a teaching situation, I certainly feel the intensity level in my body; I feel a high concentration level in the room and a positive constructive energy. When I feel that the

*The students dancing with lights in the dark gym hall.
Photographer: Ina Gammelholm*



students are engaged and emotionally involved, it is reflected and expressed in their bodies. They move intuitively from the inside out instead of judging how they look when doing their movements. They are deeply committed with their whole body and soul and although they are talking they only talk about the task. It is often in this atmosphere that the students really enjoy dancing.

In order to define intensity it can be useful to compare it to situations where it is not present. In a room with no intensity the atmosphere is heavy and tiring. There is total stillness or a lot of unstructured noise. There is a lot of energy that is not floating in the same direction. The mood is either frantic and shallow or slow and tedious.

Teach with Flow in Mind

Why is flow useful? And how can we use it as teachers? I strive towards my students obtaining a state of flow whenever possible. It is a delightful mental state which contributes to a strong and good working environment in the class. Flow also promotes learning. The students at the Ingrid Jespersen School were really good at remembering what we did in class the day before because it had been meaningful to them and they had been focused. In the paper “Om kunsten at finde flow i en verden der ofte forhindrer det” (“On the Art of Finding Flow in a World that Often Hinders It”) Hans Henrik Knoop (2005) describes how flow can promote the learning process. In my view the following quotation quite accurately describes how the mental state of flow affected my students:

The state of flow must be a general pedagogical ideal because it makes you extremely perceptive to learning in that you are optimally challenged, fully focused and emotionally so involved. Therefore it is likely that you will remember what you worked with to a very large degree. (Knoop 2005,110) ²

The mental state of flow obviously has many benefits for students. If this state is so valuable why can we not just teach in a way that allows our students to experience flow at all times? If a teacher believes that flow can be achieved every time the students follow a set of parameters, she or he will often be frustrated because many other aspects also play a role in a teaching situation.

There can be many different reasons why flow cannot be achieved. One example could be when a student experiences concentration problems because of something that happened outside of school. It could also be that the student tried a similar exercise before and easily gets distracted simply because the task is too easy. A student who is very insecure about his or her choices and afraid to make individual decisions can find it difficult to reach the intensity of working that is required to achieve flow (Knoop, 2005). Additionally in the world it can be very difficult, sometimes impossible, to work undisturbed. This is one of the hardest factors to take into account when teaching. Working with 20 students in a room without any of them interrupting each other through the duration of the class is rare. But some days it happens, and everything just seems to come together. It is also possible to establish a work environment in which the students are free to take a little break and to watch the activity in class without disturbing the other students. Different structures may work for different groups of students, but trying out different solutions might help in finding a way that works for a particular group.

So there is no flow guarantee even when the teacher follows all the *flow forming factors*. But it is important to plan with flow in mind. Clear tasks and structures are important, and sharing your main goal with the students enables the work effort in the class to follow the same path. It is possible to create and plan for a good working environment. There are practical issues such as making sure that the students wear clothes that allow them to move freely, that the music and temperature is comfortable etc. More complex is the task of creating an atmosphere of acceptance and openness.

2 Translation by Lene Bonde.

How Can Flow be Induced?

Concrete ideas and inspiration for teaching: A simple way of making sure that the students are aware of the framework and the aim of the particular task is to hang notes, pictures, dance recipes and the like on the wall. This way everyone can refer to them from wherever they are working in the room, and it also makes it easier for you as a teacher to remember and explain the structure you prepared before class (see picture 2). In the class I discussed earlier the students participated actively by writing the dance recipes down together with me. This in turn encouraged the ownership and agency of the students and led to further motivation in engaging with the assignment.

A dance recipe is another way of clarifying the framework for a given task. To make a dance recipe you write down all the elements or moves that the dance consists of. Each element or movement is written on a single paper. The next step is to stick all the papers on the wall in the order that they appear in the dance. This method opens up numerous possibilities to play with the structure of the dance and with students' memory. Maybe in the next class the students have to recreate the structure by putting the papers on the wall in the right order. Trying to remember the dance can turn into a little game. If you wish for all the students to have different structures each of them can write down their own unique dance recipe.

On the next page there is an illustration of the three dance recipes that I worked with during my time at the Ingrid Jespersen School. You can see them hanging on the gym wall in picture 2. Different movements or elements are assigned different names. A good idea which I, however, did not employ in this case is to name the movements with the students. This makes it easier for the students to remember and relate to them and the students will often come up with something quirky and funny.

Dance recipes can be helpful to all dancers no matter what style, level or age group you teach because they contribute to a good starting point. Dance recipes create a common dance language in your class that can be useful and maybe helps avoid misunderstandings.

When I teach dance I pay a lot of attention to differentiating my instructions. Since each student has an individual skill level, the class demands variable levels of challenge in order for everyone to be able to work in the flow zone. In the creative dance class this means encouraging the students to make up their own movements from the beginning of the process. This allows me to start from the level my students are at rather than where I think they are. If the students have to learn the same phrase, for instance a piece of unison choreography, I always facilitate so the students have choices in the challenge level they follow.

Inspiration and Ideas

To help facilitate intensity and flow in a dance class:

Use inspiring music. This is of course a matter of taste, but try out different kinds of music and see how your students respond. I like to work with a strong beat and a recognizable theme. An example is: "Fleur De Lille" by Parov Stelar.

Hang a big clear dance recipe on the wall that shows the students the elements of their dance.

Move around in the room when you teach. Be visible and helpful. If you have your music on an mp3-player a remote control is handy because it allows you to keep your focus on the group at all times.

Show appreciation for the students' work.

Be flexible. Throw away your plan for the class if you feel that the students need something different. Feel the atmosphere in the room in your own body.

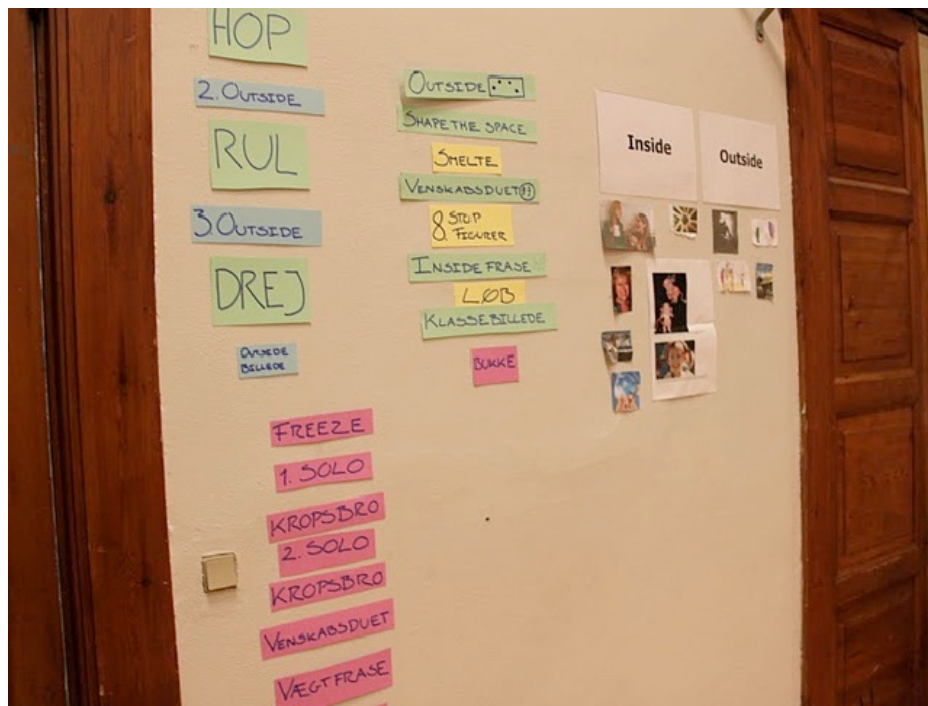
Be clear and precise in your communication.

Differentiate your teaching. Prepare your class so each student can be accommodated.

Delegate or pass on tasks. It creates ownership for and empowers the agency of the students.

Share your goals with the students.

Prepare the students beforehand, for example, by recommending the right kind of clothes etc.



One of the walls in the gym ball.
Photographer: Ina Gammelholm

Outside Solo

Outside picture
1. Outside Figure
Jump
2. Outside Figure
Roll
3. Outside Figure
Turn
Outside picture

Inside Duet

Freeze
1. Solo
Body bridge
2. Solo
Body bridge
Weight phrase
Freeze

Inside/outside

Dance
Outside beginning
Shape the space
Melting
Inside duet
8 stop figures
Inside phrase
Run
Class picture

In Their Own Words

In the end of the week I asked all the students to write down a short story, a poem, or simply some of their thoughts about the dance week. It is a nice way for them to reflect and for me to know more about what each student felt inside.

Men sådan blev det ikke

— A dance poem by Aksel and Jesper

*En kedelig dans troede,
vi det ville blive.
En kedelig vals,
ville ikke ha meget at sige.
Men sådan blev det ikke.*

*Duet og single,
det er bare sjovt.
Ikke som vi troede,
at det ville blive flot.
Men sådan blev det ikke.*

*At optræde med dans,
er nu blevet fedt.
Men da Deia sagde det,
Tænkte vi "shit".
Men sådan blev det ikke.*

*Dans til inside, dans til outside.
Hvert et billede danner en figur.
Vi triviede om vi kunne nå det,
Når vi kiggede på vores ur.
Men sådan blev det ikke.*

The essence of the poem

In order to not disturb the natural rhythm in the poem, I present it in its original language only.

The title of the poem is 'But that's not how it turned out'. The two boys make use of the dance terminology they have been introduced to during the week. They write about how boring they thought it would be to dance, and that they were surprised by how much fun it was. They thought it would be frightening to perform, but that is not how it turned out. Dancing was not as they expected it to be.

Aksel's and Jesper's dance poem shows that the week with dance was valuable to them because it was fun and they learned something. They did not expect to find joy in dancing, but because they became fully involved they managed to cross different limits such as performing, making their own dance and reading their poem aloud at the showing. Transcending these limits led to positive results which was meaningful and valuable to the boys. This is also a sign that flow was present. After all, the optimal experience of flow brings meaning and value to the practitioner. The feeling of happiness and satisfaction which the boys often experienced is also an indication of flow because working in the flow zone lets you enter a state of pleasure.



*Class 7b performing their inside/outside dance.
Photographer: Ina Gammelholm*

Final Thoughts

In my teaching period at the Ingrid Jespersen School the dance recipes really helped me and my students to focus in the classes and involved a sense of fun and satisfaction. The dance recipes may seem like a way to teach which leaves little room for the teacher to improvise. However, I found that using the dance recipes did not limit my creativity or ability to improvise in the classes. To me the dance recipes made the purpose of our class clear, and once I was aware of the purpose, it gave me freedom to improvise and follow my students' needs. While improvising I could still stay on the right path and keep the purpose of the class in mind.

With my experiments to teach with a sense of flow it has become very evident to me how vital the teacher's planning and teaching methods are in order to achieve this mental and physical state. Sometimes flow appears without the teacher aiming for it. When this happens the teacher must pay attention to the energy in the room and feel that it is changing. If the intensity in the room rises, it is important to take a step back and gently guide the students. There is no final checklist that makes it possible to achieve flow, but when the energy does come together, it is important for the teacher to feel, guide and *ride the wave of intensity* with the students.

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BIOGRAPHY

Lene Bonde is educated as a dance instructor from "Skolerne i Oure – Sport & Performance" in 2006. Currently she returns on occasion to the school to teach contemporary dance. In 2007 Lene graduated from the one-year preparation course at Copenhagen Contemporary Dance School. Her education as a professional contemporary dancer she completed at the Hamburg Contemporary Dance School in 2010. At the moment Lene is studying in a two-year postgraduate education program in "Dance Partnership" at the National School of Theater and Contemporary Dance in Denmark. In 2010 she opened her own business through which she teaches hip hop, jazz and contemporary dance to students of all levels. Lene is based in Copenhagen and also works as a freelance dance artist – performing, teaching, choreographing and researching. www.lenebonde.com, mail@lenebonde.com

BIOGRAFI

Lene Bonde er uddannet danseinstruktør fra "Skolerne i Oure – Sport & Performance" i 2006 og vender stadig tilbage til skolen som gæsteunderviser. I 2007 blev Lene uddannet fra den et årig forberedende danseuddannelse Copenhagen Contemporary Dance School. Lene er uddannet professionel moderne danser i 2010 på Hamborg Contemporary Dance School. På nuværende tidspunkt studerer hun til danseformidler på Skolen for Moderne Dans ved Statens Teaterskole. I 2010 åbnede Lene eget firma, hvor hun underviser forskellige aldersgrupper i hip hop, jazz og moderne dans. Lene er bosat i København og arbejder her som freelance dansekunstner: optræder, underviser, koreograferer og researcher. www.lenebonde.com, mail@lenebonde.com