

Integrating Free Expression of Modern Dance into Dance Movement Therapy: A Tension-Resonance Approach between Structure

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ABSTRACT

The tradition of free improvisation in modern dance stands in potential tension with the structural requirements, boundaries, and safety needs that are fundamental to Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT). This study adopts a theoretical approach, employing a systematic review and textual analysis of international research and art-theoretical works to explore the philosophical and embodied foundations of improvisation and to investigate the therapeutic functions of structural mechanisms within DMT. Representative texts—including Ravn and Høffding's enactivist analysis of improvisation, Himberg et al.'s studies on collective improvisation protocols, and Dou et al.'s empirical research on improvisation training—are analyzed as dialogical cases.

Building upon these analyses, the study proposes the Tension-Resonance Model, which emphasizes the concepts of oscillation and boundary elasticity. The model offers theoretical, pedagogical, and research-oriented insights aimed at constructing a practical framework that integrates improvisational freedom within therapeutic structure. Ultimately, the research seeks to provide an applicable pathway for DMT theory and education—one that preserves structural safety while opening new avenues for free expression and embodied creativity.

1. Introduction

Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT), as a therapeutic modality that employs bodily movement as a channel for psychological, emotional, cognitive, social, and relational expression, is grounded in theories emphasizing the integration of body, emotion, and cognition. A substantial body of empirical research has demonstrated that DMT—through non-verbal expression, relational engagement with therapists or groups, and mind-body integration—has positive effects on depression, anxiety, quality of life, and interpersonal functioning (Koch et al., 2019). However, many DMT programs rely on structural prompts, phased

procedures, and interactional rules to maintain safety, controllability, and evaluability within individual or group settings.

Meanwhile, modern dance and improvisational traditions have long emphasized bodily agency, intrinsic corporeal impulses, free exploration, and creative expression. In artistic practice, dancers often oscillate between “technical structure” and “free improvisation” (letting go / control) to generate new movement vocabularies. Within the context of DMT, an under-theorized question concerns how to negotiate the coexistence of structure and improvisation in such a way that free expression can emerge without compromising safety, containment, or therapeutic direction.

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The term “free expression in modern dance,” as used in this article, primarily refers to improvisational and individualized expressive traditions derived from twentieth-century modern dance lineages. Its conceptual roots can be traced to figures such as Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham, who emphasized natural bodily rhythm and inner emotional expression, and further to postmodern dance practitioners (e.g., Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, the Judson Church collective), who expanded these ideas into more open improvisation systems and explorations of performer–audience relations. Thus, the “free improvisation” discussed here is not random movement detached from structure, but a creative lineage in which the body functions as a thinking subject—a consciously generative process shaped by training, perception, and relational dynamics. This definition clarifies the distinction between “free expression” and “disordered movement,” and provides a conceptual foundation for examining its dialogue with the structured practices of DMT.

This article adopts a theoretical rather than empirical approach: it does not rely on the author’s own practice-based data but instead constructs a model through literature and textual analysis, intended to support teaching or future empirical research. Within this framework, the study addresses the following core questions:

- (1) What are the ontological and cognitive foundations of improvisation in modern dance and body-centered philosophies?
- (2) What primary functions do structural mechanisms serve within DMT processes?
- (3) How might a tension-based mechanism be constructed such that structure ensures safety while opening pathways for improvisation?
- (4) On this basis, how can a theoretical model be established, and what pedagogical or research implications can be drawn?

The following sections review theoretical perspectives on improvisation and structure, analyze several key texts, construct the proposed model, and discuss its applicability and limitations.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Philosophical–Embodied Perspectives on Improvisation and the Function of Structure in DMT

Improvisation is not an unbounded or disorderly form of movement; rather, it is a generative practice unfolding within training, habitus, contextual framing, and relational agreements. In their article “*Improvisation and Thinking in Movement: An Enactivist Analysis of Agency in Artistic Practices*”, Ravn and Høffding (2022) argue that improvisation embodies an oscillation of agency, in which dancers alternate between “intentional control” and “letting-go responsiveness.” Their research underscores that improvisation is contextually embedded, purposively trained, and relational, rather than a mode of absolute freedom (Ravn & Høffding, 2022).

This perspective aligns with enactivist and embodied cognition theories, which propose that body, perception, action, and intention are interwoven; thinking does not precede movement as a pre-planned execution but emerges through an ongoing cycle of movement–perception–adjustment. Improvisation, therefore, is a generative process that is simultaneously cognitive and corporeal. This framing legitimizes the treatment of improvisation in DMT as a form of free expression rather than “random or chaotic” movement.

Research on artistic improvisation often emphasizes its non-representational creative space, one whose aesthetic value lies in uncertainty, tension, and surprise. Yet, from a therapeutic-expression standpoint, such openness must be grounded in a structural scaffold to function as a stable and safe expressive pathway. Improvisation is thus not the opposite of structure but a mode of generation oscillating between structured and unstructured processes. This suggests that incorporating improvisation into DMT does not dismantle structure; instead, it redefines structure as a scaffold or elastic boundary that enables improvisation to emerge safely and meaningfully.

2.2. Functions of Structural Mechanisms in DMT

In DMT program design, structural prompts, spatial boundaries, rhythmic guidance, temporal regulation, and group-interaction protocols are commonly implemented to provide predictability, safety, emotional containment, and traceability. As noted in the meta-analysis by Koch et al., DMT demonstrates moderate effects on depression, anxiety, quality of life, interpersonal functioning, and cognitive abilities ($d \approx 0.30$, $p < 0.001$, $I^2 = 3.47$), supporting the effectiveness of structured interventions across psychological, emotional, and relational domains (Koch et al., 2019).

Additionally, the systematic review “*The Effects of Dance Movement Therapy in the Treatment of Depression*” reports that in several randomized controlled trials (RCTs), DMT combined with treatment-as-usual (TAU) yielded greater reductions in depressive symptoms than TAU alone (Hyvönen et al., 2020). These studies collectively indicate that structured design is indispensable in DMT practice.

However, excessively rigid or formulaic structures may constrain bodily creativity, emotional flow, and individual expression, potentially undermining the therapeutic potential of movement as an expressive medium. Structure in DMT therefore functions not merely as a mechanism of control but as one of coordination, support, and integration. Its design must avoid rigidity or suppression; otherwise, it may obstruct creativity and affective regulation. In short, structural elements in DMT should be understood as supportive rather than restrictive.

3. International Research and Textual Dialogue

3.1. Ravn & Høffding (2022): Oscillatory Mechanisms in Improvisation

Through interviews and practice analyses with professional improvisational dancers and musicians, Ravn and Høffding argue that improvisation embodies an “oscillation of agency”—a continuous alternation between trained mental/bodily control and a spontaneous mode of “letting things happen” (Ravn & Høffding, 2022). This view highlights that improvisation does not stand outside structure; rather, it constitutes a co-constitutive process in which structured elements and modern-dance improvisational freedom coexist. Their perspective provides both a philosophical and embodied foundation for designing structure–improvisation integrations within DMT, establishing a productive tension between the two domains.

3.2. Himberg et al.: Collective Improvisation Protocols

In “*Coordinated Interpersonal Behaviour in Collective Dance Improvisation: The Aesthetics of Kinaesthetic Togetherness*”, the researchers introduced protocols such as mirroring tasks, rhythmic counter-actions, and turn-taking initiation to foster experiences of synchrony and kinaesthetic connectedness, while still allowing individual expressive variance (Himberg et al., 2018). Their study

demonstrates that structured protocols can maintain group stability without suppressing creative expression. These findings offer actionable insights for DMT group-session design, especially regarding balancing containment with freedom.

3.3. *Dou et al.: Experimental Studies on Improvisation Training*

Dou, Jia, and Ge (2021) integrated improvisation training with structural prompts in a university dance-training context, examining effects on creativity, self-efficacy, and psychological states. Their results indicate that the combination of structured and improvisational components leads to multidimensional improvements (Dou et al., 2021). Although conducted outside a clinical DMT setting, their experimental findings provide valuable support for the feasibility of structure–improvisation integration in psychological interventions and expressive training.

4. The Structure–Improvisation Tension–Resonance Model

Building on the theoretical and textual analyses above, this article proposes the Structure–Improvisation Tension–Resonance Model, designed to offer a conceptual pathway for DMT practice and to articulate its core concepts and mechanisms.

4.1. *Core Concepts of the Model*

- (1) **Structural Scaffolds:** Rhythmic cues, spatial rules, task prompts, interactional protocols, and temporal/sequence constraints that provide safety boundaries and reference frames.
- (2) **Free Improvisation:** Movement expression driven by bodily impulses, perceptual responses, and affective emergence.
- (3) **Oscillation:** Intentional or spontaneous shifting between structured guidance and free improvisation to sustain tension and dynamic flow.
- (4) **Boundary Elasticity:** The boundary between structure and improvisation is not fixed but dynamically adjustable according to individual states, group dynamics, and therapeutic stages.
- (5) **Contextual Embeddedness:** Choices between structure and improvisation are shaped by cultural context, bodily experience, group interaction, and therapeutic goals.

In this model, structural scaffolds do not suppress improvisation; rather, they provide a resonant boundary within which improvisation can emerge. Oscillation enables dynamic movement between the two poles; boundary elasticity allows proportional adjustment across stages and individuals; contextual embeddedness ensures the model remains adaptable rather than prescriptive.

In educational and professional training contexts, the model may serve as a teaching–supervision framework. For example, DMT training programs may employ “structured-to-improvised transitions” to cultivate bodily sensitivity and situational judgment; group teaching can draw on the oscillation mechanism to pace sessions so that students encounter gradual improvisation within safe structures; in supervision, instructors may use a boundary elasticity index to assess how trainees negotiate guidance and release. Thus, the model possesses both theoretical explanatory power and direct applicability in education and clinical practice.

4.2. *A Somatic Metaphor of Tension and Resonance*

“Tension” and “resonance” are not merely abstract theoretical notions but have concrete somatic correlates. At the movement level, tension manifests in patterns of muscular contraction and release, grounding and suspension, gravity and counter-gravity. At the emotional level, it reflects the physicalization of internal conflict and expressive urge. “Resonance,” in contrast, can be understood as kinaesthetic attunement and the transmission of affective energy: when participants respond to one another’s movement, breath, or rhythm, collective resonance transforms into a therapeutic experience.

Within the DMT context, this “tension–resonance” process functions as a dynamic tuning mechanism. By sensing micro-tensions and spatial expansion within their own bodies, and by attuning to others’ movement rhythms, participants generate kinaesthetic empathy. The Tension–Resonance Model thus describes not only the interaction between structure and freedom but also the embodied manifestation of psychological energy flow.

4.3. *Operational Pathway (Illustrative Stages)*

Stage 1: Establishing Structural Scaffolds

Rhythmic warm-ups, spatial rules, and interactional protocols
→ secure and predictable structure

- (1) Introduce an accessible warm-up rhythm or shape-cycle (e.g., “inhale—expand—gather”).
- (2) Define spatial rules (e.g., participants do not cross a central line; turn-taking in initiating/responding).
- (3) Clarify interaction protocols (sequence, response mode, timing).
- (4) Offer brief improvisation segments (1–2 minutes) framed by the structural cues.

Stage 2: Transition from Structure to Freedom (Oscillation Phase)

Reducing cues, extending improvisation → opening expressive space

- (1) Reduce structural cues (e.g., remove rhythmic prompts while retaining spatial rules).
- (2) Extend improvisational periods (3–5 minutes) to allow freer movement flow.
- (3) When emotional overflow, disorientation, or stagnation occurs, reintroduce partial structure (e.g., rhythm cues).
- (4) Track nonverbal indicators—breath, force, sound, stillness—movement shifts—as bases for modulation.

Stage 3: Improvisation-Led Process

Long-form improvisation with minimal intervention → deeper expressive exploration

- (1) Open longer improvisational intervals (5–7 minutes) within a secure base.
- (2) Encourage participants to enter a “flow” state without imposing formal demands while maintaining boundary awareness.
- (3) Therapist intervenes minimally when necessary (e.g., prompts such as “shift gravitational orientation,” “explore near/far space”).

Stage 4: Integrative Return

Reintroducing structure, bodily and verbal reflection → meaning integration

- (1) After improvisation, use structured exercises (e.g., repeating a rhythm or movement motif) to return to form.
- (2) Engage in verbal and bodily reflection (e.g., revisiting a meaningful movement fragment).
- (3) Facilitate integration across structural, verbal, and somatic dimensions.

Stage 5: Cyclic Adjustment

Modulating the ratio of structure and improvisation across sessions

- (1) Across multiple sessions, the cycle can be repeated while adjusting ratios according to skill level, emotional stability, and group dynamics.
- (2) In later phases, sessions may adopt a “improvisation-led with structural supplementation” mode to deepen creative exploration.

The model emphasizes that structure and improvisation are neither static opposites nor a linear progression. Instead, they constitute a dynamic, oscillatory, resonant whole. By integrating oscillation mechanisms and boundary elasticity, the model gains adaptive flexibility and conceptual coherence, aligning with philosophical accounts of improvisation, embodied cognition, DMT empirical research, and improvisation-based experimental studies.

4.4. Discussion: Applications, Challenges, and Future Directions

The proposed model helps dismantle the traditional dichotomy between structure and free improvisation, offering a bridging framework for DMT theory, pedagogical design, and intervention practice. It enables therapists to retain safety-oriented structures while intentionally opening space for improvisational expression. Through oscillatory and elasticity-based regulatory mechanisms, participants may gradually enhance bodily awareness, emotional release, and creative expression during the therapeutic process.

However, the model also faces several limitations and challenges. In East Asian cultural contexts, the acceptance of “free improvisation” tends to be relatively low. Influenced by collectivism, ritual culture, and lineage-based pedagogical systems, dance education in this region often emphasizes imitation, precision, and normative execution rather than self-generation and nonlinear exploration. As a result, introducing DMT within such cultural contexts may provoke anxiety or defensive reactions when participants encounter open-ended tasks. Accordingly, applying the model in East Asia requires expanding the proportion of the structural-support phase and gradually enlarging the space for improvisation. Strengthening rhythmic structure and spatial order during early training can help participants build trust in expressive freedom through familiarity. Furthermore, incorporating concepts from indigenous body philosophies—such as “inner-outer congruence” or “dynamic balance between stillness and movement”—may serve as culturally grounded bridges that align the model with East Asian cognitive and embodied traditions.

Other limitations should also be acknowledged: the model has yet to be empirically tested in actual DMT settings; cultural and group differences in improvisation tolerance vary widely; and for

participants with significant emotional trauma, poorly structured design may trigger dysregulation or psychological overwhelm. The model also places high demands on therapist competence, requiring refined bodily attunement, moment-to-moment observation, and adaptive modulation skills.

Future research should incorporate structure-improvisation transition training into DMT curricula and employ mixed qualitative methods (video analysis, participant interviews, and nonverbal-behavior indicators) to validate the model in real group settings. Investigations should further explore its applicability across cultures, clinical populations, and age groups. Crucially, structural-improvisational parameters—such as duration of improvisation, cue frequency, and proportion of structural reintroduction—should be correlated with therapeutic outcomes (e.g., emotional scales, quality-of-life measures) to identify an optimal structure-improvisation ratio.

5. Conclusion

From a theoretical standpoint, this article integrates modern-dance improvisation traditions with structural mechanisms in Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) and proposes the Structure-Improvisation Tension-Resonance Model to analyze the tension, integration, and co-existence between structure and improvisation. The model highlights the synergistic roles of structural scaffolds, free improvisation, oscillation mechanisms, boundary elasticity, and contextual embeddedness, offering a systematic framework for conceptual development. Through analysis of international literature and representative cases, we argue that the tension between structure and improvisation is not oppositional but a dynamic equilibrium. In practice design, this balance can be achieved through phased processes, structured scaffolding cues, and contextual modulation—approaches that preserve safety while enabling expressive freedom.

Within the model, free improvisation is conceptualized as a key mechanism for enhancing bodily awareness, emotional expression, and creative capacities, while structural cues and boundaries provide psychological and somatic safety. The interplay between oscillation and boundary elasticity enables participants to shift dynamically between containment and exploration, maintaining the stability afforded by structure while activating individual creative potential. Theoretically, the model clarifies the internal mechanisms of improvisational practice in therapeutic, educational, and artistic contexts, offering new insights into the relationship between bodily agency and psychological safety.

Furthermore, the model holds broad potential for educational design, clinical application, and future research. Pedagogically, oscillation between structure and improvisation can be operationalized through staged guidance, interaction protocols, and feedback loops, giving learners a concrete and actionable pathway. In future studies, mixed methodological approaches—such as qualitative inquiry, behavioral observation, and neuropsychological indicators—may be employed to evaluate the model’s validity and cross-cultural applicability. Overall, this study provides theoretical and practical space for integrating dance therapy with modern-dance improvisational traditions, offering meaningful implications for internationalized education, clinical practice, and cross-cultural research.

Author Contribution

Yinyi Zhang is currently a PhD candidate in Dance Studies at Dankook University, Yongin, South Korea. Her research focuses on modern dance choreography, the integration of modern dance with Chinese ethnic and folk dance, the application of creative improvisation in dance/movement therapy, and embodied pedagogical models in higher dance education. She has created several works blending modern and ethnic dance vocabularies, and her recent scholarship centers on structural-improvisational tension mechanisms in dance/movement therapy. As the sole author, she independently conceived the study, conducted the literature review and analysis, developed the theoretical model, and completed all writing and revisions of the manuscript.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Not Required

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Competing Interest declaration

The author declare that, to their knowledge, they have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest regarding the work described in this manuscript.

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