

# The Power of Dance: Teaching International Relations Through Contact Improvisation

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# **The Power of Dance: Teaching International Relations through Contact Improvisation<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, growing concern in International Relations to offer a more inclusive and active learning experience has led to the increased use of practical exercises, visual teaching materials like movies and fictional television, as well as social media and e-learning tools to address this concern. Despite noteworthy achievements in bridging the everyday lives of International Relations students, these teaching contributions have yet to explore its potential more comprehensively. Students who prefer to learn through practical exercises still struggle to access the more abstract and theoretical topics of International Relations and the role of emotions for active learning remains underdeveloped. To provide a more inclusive International Relations teaching that considers the requirements of all types of learners, to encourage students to rethink what is taken for granted in the discipline by exploring their emotions, and to promote discussions about issues that otherwise might have remained silenced, this paper suggests that the introduction of a dance workshop into International Relations curricula is beneficial for the learning experience of students. Modern, egalitarian dances like contact improvisation can be used to teach world politics in a different way, as students not only learn about its topics, but they also perform them.

## **Keywords**

Active Learning, Contact Improvisation, Dance, Kinesthetic Learning, Teaching International Relations

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## Introduction

Over the last few years, the way International Relations (IR) is being taught at universities has changed significantly. Social media and e-learning tools are now widely used to extend learning spaces beyond the classroom and to provide for a more interactive learning environment (cf. Ralph, Head, and Lightfoot 2010; Blair 2013; Mihai 2014; Goerres, Kärger, and Lambach 2015). Pedagogical innovations were further encouraged by intellectual advancements in the discipline. Aiming to transcend the “narrow realities” (Bleiker 2001, 524) of high politics as well as recognizing that people mainly give meaning to their life-worlds and find access to (world) politics through everyday experiences (Moore and Shepherd 2010, 307; Clapton and Shepherd 2016, 1) has made the profession receptive to previously underappreciated areas of research like popular culture (cf. Doucet 2005; Neumann and Nexon 2006; Holden 2010; Grayson 2013; Kiersey and Neumann 2013; Rösch 2014), tourism and travel (cf. Lisle 2006; 2016; Guillaume 2011), and emotions (cf. Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Hutchison and Bleiker 2014; Coicaud 2016). This thematic extension is reflected in more comprehensive IR curricula (cf. Ruane and James 2008; Swimelar 2013; Grayson 2015) with a British university even offering a postgraduate degree in world politics and popular culture.

Common to these recent pedagogical contributions is their aspiration to stimulate a more inclusive and active learning experience. To achieve the former, IR scholarship has begun to take the diversity of its global student cohorts into account. Movies have become a common tool to address this diversity since Cynthia Weber’s (2001) seminal paper, as they provide for a particularly memorable and accessible experience to help students to think about world politics “in a more intensive, differentiated, and subtle way” (Krippendorff 1990, 8; author’s translation). For similar reasons IR has begun to introduce practical elements into its teaching, but in comparison to the visual improvements the practical potential to improve IR teaching remains underdeveloped. Employing these previously underappreciated topics for IR teaching also sustains ambitions of providing for a more active learning experience, as “higher-level skills like ‘apply’, ‘analysis’ and ‘evaluate’” (Gifkins 2015) are being trained. It is hoped that by learning these skills students are being enabled to critically reflect on the (world) political *status quo* and to translate their critical analyses into imaginations

of different socio-political realities (cf. Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009; Lambach 2015; Holland 2016).

To add on to this emergent literature, this paper suggests introducing dancing into IR curricula, as it provides for further opportunities of inclusive teaching and a more active learning experience. Dancing is an integral part of human sociation. People dance for profane and sacred reasons in order to celebrate (e.g. weddings and festivals), to mourn, before and after war, and often simply to have fun (Hanna 1987; Marchart 2012). Through dancing, as a globally used means for creating “semiotic systems generated from, but irreducible to, the plurality of discrete individual exchanges that comprise them” (Jenco 2015, 140), people collectively give meaning to their life-worlds and, in doing so, they contribute to their identity-formation. Dancing, therefore, can enable students to experience global politics in a different manner than the common classroom setting can provide. Students learn about IR and its theories sensually, emotionally, and physically through their own bodies and in collectivity. Dancing also contributes to a more active learning environment because students not merely read about global politics, but they can perform it. Thereby, students are given the opportunity to gain a more comprehensive understanding about (world) politics, to take ownership of their spaces, and to sustain and even to challenge their political communities.

To give evidence to this argument, this paper proceeds in four steps. In the first two sections, a more comprehensive picture of inclusive and active learning is drawn. To provide an inclusive learning experience, an adopted VARK model (Fleming 2012) is elaborated in the first section, while the role of emotions for active learning is stressed in the second section. The third section introduces modern dance in the form of contact improvisation to the IR curriculum, while the specific use and potential benefits of contact improvisation in an undergraduate module on power and political violence at a British university is discussed in the last section.

### **Accommodating Different Learning Styles in Teaching IR**

The internationalization of higher education particularly impacted on teaching in an Anglophone environment. Being the *lingua franca*, courses offered in English attract students from all over the world. Matthew Krain, Kent Kille, and Jeffrey Lantis (2015,

143) report that 15 % of students at universities in the United Kingdom, the country in which I teach, have an international background, but judging from my own experience this percentage is likely to be higher for IR. Recent research has shown that the resulting diversity in terms of gender, culture, religion, and socio-political background affects students' approaches to learning (cf. Yamazaki 2005; Joy and Kolb 2009; Krain, Kille, and Lantis 2015) and as a consequence best practice suggests to extend one's teaching repertoire to provide for a more inclusive learning experience (Romanelli, Bird, and Ryan 2009, 3).

Aiming to accommodate this diversity, there are various ways of grouping learners (for an overview, see Kolb and Kolb 2005; Hawk and Shah 2007). This paper adopts the VARK model as conceived by Neil Fleming (2012), as it is a particularly apt way to capture the different learning styles in a highly internationalized environment. This model classifies learning styles understood as "preferred ways of gathering, organizing, and thinking about information" (Fleming 2012, 1) according to the senses that people habitually involve in receiving information. With the exception of smelling and tasting, VARK, an acronym that stands for visual, aural, read/write, and kinesthetic, takes all senses into account (Fleming and Baume 2007, 5). While VARK is not without its problems, especially with regards to testing its algorithm (Leite, Svinicki, and Shi 2010), this "sensory model" (Hawk and Shah 2007, 6) allows IR scholars to positively engage with the diversity of their students without essentializing differences. This is because, by aiming to incorporate all senses, instructors can reach their students more comprehensively than would be possible by focusing on their individual differences *per se*. The latter would bear the risk of foregrounding the preferred learning styles of the module leader or majoritarian student groups, hindering ambitions to provide inclusive teaching.

Traditionally, IR like many other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities has served aural and read/write learners well, as the core of its teaching is provided through lectures and seminars. The former is particularly suitable for aural learners who have a preference for the spoken word. They progress academically most when listening to or discussing with others (Fleming 2012, 1). Apart from lectures, presentations and discussion groups as commonly found in seminars are also serving their needs (Hawk and Shah 2007, 7). Technological innovations have further

benefited these learners. While the recording of lectures (and podcasts in general) and making them digitally available is nowadays common practice (Ralph, Head, and Lightfoot 2010; Obradovic-Wochnik and Hayes 2016), recent scholarship also highlighted the benefits of using the flipped classroom model in supporting aural learning (cf. Kim et al. 2014; Lambach 2015). Heather Hawn (2013, 526) even uses popular music in her teaching, demonstrating that songs touch students emotionally, sensibilizing them for global political questions and incentivizing discussions. Read/write, by contrast, stands for learners who prefer to receive information in written form (Fleming 2012, 1). Seminars in the traditional form of a discussion about a required piece of reading, be it a book, an article, or a blog-post, particularly support the learning process of these students. By using social media apps like *Facebook* or *Twitter* (Briggs 2012; Lieberman 2013; Blair 2013), an interactive learning environment can be created that extends the read/write learning experience even beyond the classroom.

With the increased visual opportunities of social media and due to the aesthetic turn in IR (Bleiker 2001) with its focus on popular culture, a further type of learners received increased attention in recent years. Students, who prefer material to be visualized that otherwise might have been presented through words (Fleming 2012, 1), profit from the use of graphs, symbols, and charts through presentation software like *Power Point* or *Prezi*. In contrast to Fleming, however, this paper agrees with Thomas Hawk and Amit Shah (2007, 7), arguing that the use of movies and pictures is also beneficial for visual learners. Ever since Weber's (2001) discussion of the benefits of using movies to teach IR students, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *The Battle of Algiers* as well as TV series like *The Simpsons* and *The West Wing* have been turned into a common teaching tool in IR classrooms across the globe (cf. Kuzma and Haney 2001; Webber 2005; Woodcock 2008; Ruane and James 2008; Engert and Spencer 2009; Swimelar 2013; Holland 2014, 2016). Zombie movies (and literature) have proven to be a particularly successful subgenre for teaching IR. Daniel Drezner (2009) has popularized them in a highly influential blog post, followed by a monograph, and today zombies are often used to familiarize students with a variety of core topics in IR, such as conflict, cooperation, and globalization (Hall 2011; Blanton 2013; Horn, Rubin, and Schouenborg 2016; critical Hannah and Wilkinson 2016).

The aesthetic turn also affected a final type of learners. Incorporating practical elements into IR curricula considers the needs of kinesthetic learners, as it makes IR not only visually and affectively experienceable, but also “tangible” for students (Eimer and Kranke 2015, 129). In doing so, a level of concreteness is provided that, as Laura Horn, Olivier Rubin, and Laust Schouenborg (2016, 188) posit, is particularly important for teaching IR theories, which students often find difficult to engage with. So far, however, the majority of kinesthetic innovations are aimed to train the policy relevant side of IR. This is the case with simulations. Topics ranging from the European Union (EU) and the Model United Nations (UN) (cf. McIntosh 2001; Crossley-Frolick 2010; Jozwiak 2013; Taylor 2013) to the challenge of accommodating displaced persons after natural disasters in Haiti (Zappile, Beers, and Raymond 2016) and even zombies (Horn, Rubin, and Schouenborg 2016) have helped to turn simulations into a common feature of IR degrees. A further practical element in IR teaching are field trips. While Knut Roder (2014) discussed the benefits of international field trips by visiting EU institutions in Brussels in the context of a European Studies degree, Henri Goverde and Erkki Berndtsen (2009) incorporate architecture and urban planning into their teaching by visiting local landmarks to stress the connection between (world) politics and public space. However, IR has yet to move more substantially “from the textbook and lecture to action” (McIntosh 2001, 269), as these practical teaching tools often remain outside of the core curriculum due to their extensive preparation times, possibly taking place off-campus, and potential extra costs for students. Consequently, kinesthetic learners are to date less cared for in IR teaching than the other types of learners. Introducing dancing as a practical element to teach IR in general and its theories in particular is to be seen as a contribution to further provide for a more inclusive teaching.

### **Active Learning and Emotions**

Concomitant with the desire to address the needs of all kinds of learners, recent innovations in IR teaching also raised awareness for active learning. While Kille (2002) records positive experiences in organizing in-class simulations, contributions to a visual IR, as we find it in Weber (2001) and Jack Holland (2014), highlight the relevance of movies and fictional television for active learning. Incorporating a dance workshop

into the undergraduate IR curriculum at my university also happened with the intention to provide an addition to the teaching toolbox to stimulate active learning among students.

Views, however, vary regarding what triggers active learning. While some highlight that active learning is particularly “learning by doing” (Leston-Bandeira 2012, 54), other contributions to the literature stress the ability to solve problems as integral to active learning. Joel Michael (2006, 160) argues in this respect that problem-solving forces students “to reflect upon ideas and how they are using those ideas.” Most definitions, however, agree that “students are doing more than simply listening, the aim is skills-development rather than just conveying information” (Gifkins 2015). Considering a revised Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives, as put forward by David Krathwohl (2002, 215), helps to get a more nuanced understanding of active learning. In this taxonomy, the cognitive process of learning is divided into six stages ranging from remembering and understanding as well as applying and analyzing, to evaluating and creating. Active learning goes beyond the first two stages, as the above definitions have shown, and it also transcends mere applying and analyzing of information. Rather, most important is the ability to evaluate and to create, as Krain, Kille, and Lantis (2015, 146; also Gifkins 2015) recently highlighted. Only at these latter two stages active learning turns into deep learning, as students are encouraged to train and further develop their “critical evaluative skills” (Holland 2016, 175). These skills are indispensable in developing what Holland (2016, 176) calls, in reference to Carey Jewitt and Gunther Kress, “multimodal literacy”; hence, a literacy that transcends “textual competence and critique” and supports students in imagining different socio-political realities in a self-reflexive process that is a first step in constructing more egalitarian and inclusive life-worlds (cf. Grenier 2016; Obradovic-Wochnik and Hayes 2016).

To achieve this deep learning, the role of emotions in the learning process deserve attention, as expounded in recent studies (Dirkx 2008; Trigwell, Ellis, and Han 2012). Like active learning, emotion is a ubiquitous term in higher education and definitions vary. For the purpose of this paper, however, the works of Neta Crawford and Karen Fierke are most instructive, as both scholars stress the relational character of emotions. They are affected by their surrounding socio-political world and vice versa.



Crawford (2014, 537) argues in this respect that emotions are “subjective experiences that also have physiological, intersubjective, and cultural components.” Even more poignant is Fierke (2013, 93), noting that:

emotions are not a property (...) Rather, the surfaces of bodies ‘surface’ as an effect of the impressions left by others. Emotions produce the very surfaces and boundaries by which specific kinds of objects can be delineated (...) As they move through the circulations of objects such objects become ‘sticky’ or saturated with effect, as sites of personal and social tension or contestation, as emotions are ‘made’. Emotions are thus a form of world-making.

In their social constitutedness (Dirkx 2008, 12; Hutchison and Bleiker 2014, 503), emotions are integral to the formation of identities. People give meaning to their life-worlds through emotions because, by expressing them in a ‘continuous dialogue’ (Guillaume 2014, 35), they evaluate their everyday experiences and (world) political events. In doing so, they also actively contribute to the creation of their life-worlds. People may show fear or anger towards a political event or political group as much as they can express happiness and empathy. As the definitions of Crawford and Fierke indicate, and as Anne-Marie d’Aoust (2014, 171; also Hutchison and Bleiker 2014) stresses, emotions cannot be disassociated in this process “from the materiality of bodies” (critical Ling 2014). This links emotions to the power relations that structure human life-worlds, affecting also the way people learn. Aspiring for a deep learning, therefore, requires educators to take their own and their students’ emotions into account by considering “alternative forms of insight” (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, 118). Dancing is one such alternative form of insight. As dancing is “complex, polysemous, and constantly changing”, it enables people to develop conceptions about the emotional complexity of their individual selves and it provides the platform for the emergence of a “bodily bilingualism” (Reed 1998, 506-7; also Garrett Brown 2012) that allows students to speak across class, ethnic, religious, or national differences by constituting common emotional worlds.

In particular, the aesthetic turn has helped to further thematize the role of emotions in higher education. The use of art and popular culture benefits IR teaching, as “it

provides (...) [students who do not have extensive background knowledge in IR] with a ‘familiar’ anchor through which to better understand core issues and concepts within IR” (Blanton 2013, 2) that might have otherwise remained closed to them. By enabling students to relate IR’s subjects to their own life-world experiences and interests, their emotions are being stimulated and deep learning is facilitated, as previous studies have shown (cf. Kuzma and Haney 2001, 35; Swimelar 2013, 17; Holland 2016, 175). During this process of what is referred to as “emotional learning”, however, developing emotions towards questions of global politics can turn into a problem if they become so extensive that the use of critical analytical skills is overshadowed and students are prevented from learning (Kuzma and Haney 2001, 37). To avoid this scenario, module leaders and students have to reflect on their emotions, as negative and positive emotions can both support and impede the intended learning outcomes. By accounting for the emotions which students show in the learning process, they are being supported in developing a “capacity to self-regulate” (Crawford 2014, 542). This means that deep learning requires educators and students to be sensitized about their emotions (Coicaud 2016, 487) and to be aware of how they affect the individual learning processes in collectivity. This is not a question of controlling emotions, because being passionate about a topic has a positive influence on initiating a learning process, but critically reflecting about one’s own emotions and the emotions of one’s fellow students is a first step in developing the critical evaluative skills that sustain active *and* deep learning.

### **Contact Improvisation and Teaching IR Theories**

With these ambitions in mind, a dance workshop has been introduced into an advanced undergraduate module on power and political violence in world politics. Part of the learning outcome of this module is to raise awareness about alternative forms of power, transcending the common Weberian definition that understands power as the ability to dominate others through the use of violence. Furthermore, students are being sensitized to the effects of direct violence, as well as the effects on structural and cultural violence, and on their own life-worlds (Galtung 1990).

However, not every form of dance is suitable for contributing to this learning outcome. As Robert Turner (2010, 125) shows, traditional power hierarchies continue to exist in

many forms of dance. In particular standard ballroom dances like the Waltz and Foxtrot, as well as Latin dances, such as the Rhumba and Samba, force participants to subordinate to predetermined moves and to perpetuate traditional gender hierarchies. Dances have also been performed to sustain the socio-political *status quo*. In the buildup to the peace of Westphalia, for example, the leading French negotiator François Ogier organized a *Ballet de la Paix* in Munster on February 26, 1645 in which he danced with other members of his delegation (Grimm 2002). Many dances, therefore, reify the connection between violence and power, rather than helping students to challenge this relationship. It is for this reason that contact improvisation was chosen to provide a practical learning element for students in their quest to understand alternative modes of power. This egalitarian and communal form of dance evolved at Oberlin College and other institutes of higher education in the United States in the early 1970s, when a group of students under the supervision of professional dancer Steve Paxton started to question traditional forms of dance and its enshrined gender and power hierarchies (Goldman 2007, 68-69; Cooper Albright 2013, 212-217). Since then, contact improvisation's exact definition has been widely debated, as Nancy Stark Smith (2003, 156), one of the earliest contact improvisation practitioners, recalls, but these still ongoing debates are merely a reflection of its improvisational character. Contact improvisation is an evolutionary dance that resists more conclusive definitions. Still, Daniel Lepkoff (2004, 285) provides a useful approximation to contact improvisation by suggesting the need to conceive it as a

duet dance form that creates a frame for observing the functioning of the body's reflexes and our innate abilities to respond to the unusual physical circumstances of the touch of a partner and the floor on any surface of the body.

Although this definition neglects the notion that contact improvisation is also well suited for larger groups and not only duets, it does give clues as to why this dance provides an apt practical element to stimulate the learning of kinesthetic IR students and to provide an active learning experience.

By performing contact improvisation, kinesthetic learners in particular, but also other types of learners, are supported in developing multimodal literacy, as they gain a more comprehensive understanding about themselves and others as well as the space surrounding them. This awareness is gained through a system of unstructured movements, stimulating students' senses. *Standing*, for example, is an important technique to begin contact improvisation. By aiming "to reverse (...) our dependency on the visual and bringing awareness to the nuances of the tactile" (Cooper Albright 2013, 239), it helps students to feel the relation of their bodies to the space they occupy through sensing miniscule movements, even in a state of relaxation (Stark Smith 2003, 162-163; Goldman 2007, 69). This sensual experience allows students to establish "intimate personal spaces" (Urmston and Hewison 2014, 219) in the sense that they form a deep connection with their surrounding space, creating a sense of belonging and responsibility. While *standing* is an important technique in contact improvisation, this dance is mainly performed through keeping physical contact with others. Indeed, it asks for the establishment of a "contact point" (Pallant 2006, 23) between the dancers. Being in constant contact constitutes a "benign irresolute guide", helping students to perform contact improvisation through "yielding, asserting, influencing, and being influenced" (Pallant 2006, 23). In doing so, "peripheral sensing", as Robert Turner (2010, 124) refers to it, is being nurtured, as students have to use the entire range of their physical, sensual, and emotional abilities to freely perform the dance, take ownership of it, and break free from restrictions that characterize other forms of dancing.

Contact improvisation, however, not only provides a unique entry to IR for kinesthetic learners, but it is the intention of the dance workshop to provide space for students to explore and develop the critical skills that are necessary to evaluate the current world political *status quo* and to imagine more humane alternatives, rather than being presented with predetermined narratives of different realities (generally Parker 2016). Dancing can help in this regard because, in consideration of Beate Jahn's (2016, 11) recent intervention on IR's theory praxis debate, it is an outlet to put theorizing into action, but at the same time it is a distancing from world politics (also Rösch 2016). This distancing through dancing helps students to transcend political particularities and to understand through this workshop that a more humane world

politics rests on the taking of commitment (Lawson 2008, 32) to sustain the political realm in which agonistic viewpoints can be expressed freely, just like dancing requires them to take responsibility for themselves and their peers. Dancing constitutes, therefore, one way of dealing with the challenge of transferring critical debates about international politics into the classroom (Obradovic-Wochnik and Hayes 2016, 6).

To visualize, dancing was introduced in the present module with the aim to avert Hannah and Wilkinson's (2016) concern of essentializing the socio-political *status quo* by facilitating students' moving beyond a Weberian understanding of power towards a more inclusive understanding, as we find it in the writings of Hannah Arendt. For her, "[p]ower corresponds to the human ability not just to act but act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (Arendt 1970, 44). For Arendt (1970, 51), therefore, power can only evolve in the absence of violence. Even though Paxton was originally inspired by his earlier experience with the Japanese martial art aikido (Pallant 2006, 13), contact improvisation is a dance that supports non-violence (Goldman 2007, 61). It emerged in the wake of peace and civil rights movements in the United States as a dance that can only be fully explored through collectivity by encouraging spontaneous, interactive movements, and by resisting the following of a predetermined set of steps. It offers "a movement practice that develop[s] physical and mental flexibility and strength within a state of constant flux" (Stark Smith 2003, 163). This awareness of the fluidity of contact improvisation helps students to understand that power is also fluid, as it emerges when people start creating and taking responsibility for their own life-worlds in a collective affair. Contact improvisation therefore urges students to re-conceptualize power along the lines of Arendt. Indeed, "this encouragement of a radically participatory, active subject – capable of acting assertively and attentively in determining its own life, liberty, and happiness – was and is CI's [contact improvisation] political potential" (Turner 2010, 129). Experiencing this encouragement and realizing that only through this collective performance contact improvisation evolves freely enables students to also question seemingly given structures and narratives beyond their own life-worlds. They understand practically what Amitav Acharya (2014) is currently investigating conceptually by calling for a "Global IR"; that is the world political *status quo* also rests

on structures and narratives that condition people to accept the modern nation-state as the sole sovereign authority through marginalizing dissenting voices, but it also teaches them that this *status quo* is not set in stone.

Challenging this world political *status quo* non-violently through the collective power of people, however, requires further evaluative skills. Contact improvisation can also be useful in this regard, as students can engage critically with their emotions and the emotions of their peers, helping them to raise their self-awareness and to develop empathy and trust for others (Turner 2010, 125-126). In their performance, dancers are in constant contact with each other. They “note the instantaneous occurrences of their intermingling bodies. They follow sensation’s interplay with gravity, impulse, momentum, and each other” (Pallant 2006, 27). This contact allows dancers to develop deep sensual and emotional knowledge about their own strengths and weaknesses as well as those of their dance partners. Dancers feel the response of their partners to their own movements and gradually understand what movements overwhelm their own and their partners’ physical and mental capabilities, how much force they have to put into them to make the movements work, and which movements eventually strengthen their partners and sustain the dance (Pallant 2006, 31). This contact informs a dialogue between dancers which, according to Stark Smith (2003, 167), makes human diversity accessible to all people involved, irrespective of their diverse backgrounds. Being an emotional experience, students begin the dance workshop with the entire gamut of emotions, ranging from being surprised to joy, excitement, and also fear. Sharing them collectively in a set of unstructured movements enables students to understand that their dialogue is sustained by “multiple co-existing emotional worlds” (Ling 2014, 579) out of which they can create a common emotional experience. Hence, the collective dance experience facilitates their efforts in developing empathy for each other (Crawford 2014, 541), as only through open-mindedness and self-criticality contact improvisation can be performed. As Ann Cooper Albright (2013, 244) puts it, “the improvisational possibilities of this dancing can teach us that *emfuhlung* [sic; empathy] does not have to be only an introspective process, but rather can open us up to feeling both in and out.” By contrast, trying to impose one’s movements on others in order to dominate them would bring the dance to a premature and unsatisfying end. Students then can project

this practical experience onto global politics, realizing that, rather than the neglect of differences, it is their support that helps to develop collaborative strategies to counter the global challenges of the twenty-first century.

Having raised self-awareness in collectivity and having developed empathy towards others in this process caters for a further skill. Trust is required in contact improvisation to physically and mentally liberate practitioners. Building trust helps to accept multiple emotional worlds, without which it would be impossible for a common emotional world to evolve. This is because if basic trust is missing none of the collective movements would work, and eventually the emergence of a “third person (...) something that only lives between the dancing partners” (Urmston and Hewison 2014, 222) would be hampered. To promote the emergence of trust, contact improvisation begins through techniques like *standing*, as it enables dancers to gradually gain embodied cognition about the space they inhabit and realize that it is also frequented by other bodies. In doing so, they understand that these bodies do not represent violent impositions, but they are necessary partners to collectively construct this space. Hence, students understand that the successful performance of contact improvisation requires an active commitment towards themselves and their peers (Urmston and Hewison 2014).

### **The Power of Dance, the Dance of Power**

As already mentioned, contact improvisation has been integrated as a practical element into an advanced undergraduate module on power and political violence in world politics. This module is mandatory to all students pursuing a single honors bachelor's degree in International Relations at a British university. In consideration of Holland's (2014, 269) experiences with fictional television, which proved at times overwhelming to students with limited background knowledge about world politics, the decision was made to incorporate the dance workshop at this later stage. Furthermore, given that the module leader participates as a learner in this workshop, running it during the first year might provide a learning experience to which many students cannot easily relate, as it potentially differs from their secondary school education. To prepare students, they are introduced to key IR concepts and theories during the first year, while gradually moving away from a teacher-centered approach,

for example, through simulations. This provides them with the intellectual basis to help them to make the connection between the dance workshop and world politics. The student body at my university is made up of a diverse range of social, religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, with a high percentage of international students. This diversity is reflected in the students who have already taken this module. For three years, it has been taught during the spring semester and a total of 99 students have completed the module to date. Of these 99 students, 55 (55.6 %) were female and 44 (44.4 %) were male. Almost half of the students were British citizens (45; 45.5 %), but many of them have family backgrounds outside of the United Kingdom. A further 22 students (22.2 %) were from EU member states, and 32 students (32.3 %) came to the United Kingdom from countries in Africa, Asia, and South America. Because of this extensive diversity, it was decided to make the workshop voluntary and not to assess it, as it was assumed that not all students would feel comfortable in engaging in a dance workshop. However, all students took part, confirming Stark Smith's (2003) previously mentioned assumption. Students welcomed this dance workshop as a unique opportunity to develop a common ground in which they can engage with their differences creatively, learning to accept different emotional worlds that help them to create a common one, and enhance their critical perspective on global politics.

The dance workshop spans over two hours and is organized in cooperation with the university's school of media and performing arts. It is divided into three sections, which are run by the module leader, dance scholars, and professional dancers, with the participation of undergraduate students pursuing a degree in dance to support the learning experience of IR students. Prior to the dance workshop students are introduced to the intended learning outcome of the workshop by the module leader, while the dance instructors explain contact improvisation further, focusing on its specific movements and the wider socio-political and historical context. For most of the time, however, students engage in practicing different movements. First, movements are conducted by students alone, then in duets, and finally all students engage in a group movement. The exercises were chosen in view of the learning requirements of the kinesthetic students, while also aiming to enhance the learning experience of aural, read/write, and visual students. All movements are supposed to



enable students to understand alternative modes of power with a particular emphasis to provide for active learning by stressing multimodal literacy (Holland 2016). Furthermore, all dance movements aim to raise the sensual, physical, and emotional awareness of students, enabling them to develop the aforementioned skills that are necessary to imagine different world political realities. Following the workshop, a feedback session takes place during which students can share their thoughts and the module leader has the opportunity to inquire about the students' success in having achieved the intended learning outcome. Since its initiation, the introduction and feedback sessions have become more extensive and structured to ensure students understand the different conceptualizations of power and that enough time is allocated to critically reflect on their experiences, allowing them to have an active learning experience. The increasing quality of discussions in these sessions suggests that more extensive preparation and follow-up activities help students in this regard and that the dance workshop has a positive impact in achieving the intended learning outcomes.

There is a multitude of contact improvisation movements and in the following only a selection of the movements conducted during the workshop are being described to demonstrate this potential of contact improvisation for teaching IR. The movements conducted alone are intended to familiarize students with the dance studio in which the workshop takes place, to help them to relate themselves to this space, and to experience their peers within it. Exercises include the aforementioned *standing*, as well as sensing the space of the studio while walking through it with closed eyes. For the most part of the workshop, however, students do exercises in duets with changing partners, such as *escort down* and *reach* (Brook 2000, 14-15, 80). The former helps students to manage the force of their own weight in relation to the weight of their peers. *Escort down* asks students to stand back to back to each other with the intention to move their bodies simultaneously down to the floor and back up again. This exercise helps to build trust among students and they gain a first indication of alternative modes of power, as *escort down* can only be conducted successfully if both partners develop a sense of their own weight and that of others. The *reach* exercise has a similar intention, as students face each other, hold each other's arms, and lean backwards. They then reach out diagonally with their left arm to their partner's left

arm. This movement is repeated with the right arm. Through this repetitive crossing of arms students can have a similar experience as in the *escort down* exercise, as the successful completion of the *reach* exercise also requires students to build up collective trust. At the end of the workshop, students engage in a collective exercise in order to further stimulate their questioning of common conceptualizations of power and to incite their imagination to consider different realities through alternative forms of power. Such movements include, for example, a variation of the *round robin* exercise (Brook 2000, 85), in which students form a circle, looking at each other's backs. They then put their arms on the shoulder of the person in front of them, while having their eyes closed. This is followed by simultaneously going down to their knees, sitting on the lap of the person behind them, with the aim of standing up again. Only when students sense the intention to move of the person in front and behind them, while having an awareness of the distance to these other two students, and having the trust that the person behind them will support them in sitting on his/her lap, can this movement be completed successfully.

Given that the workshop has only run three times so far, and that only a relatively small number of students have experienced it, it would be premature to come to a conclusive answer about the success of incorporating dance into IR modules. However, there are indicators that suggest the usefulness of contact improvisation to achieve the intended learning outcome. Since the module has been added to the IR curriculum, it has been positively received by students, achieving 100 % student satisfaction in standardized and anonymous module evaluation questionnaires (MEQ) on all three occasions. This is further confirmed when considering remarks in the module questionnaire, such as "the dance workshop was useful and enjoyable" (student A in MEQ 2015-2016) and "the dance seminar was a great idea" (student B in MEQ 2015-2016). Students also discussed the workshop outside of the classroom via social media, such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *Twitter*, prior to and after the workshop. While this does not confirm that contact improvisation contributed to achieving the intended learning outcome, it shows that students enjoyed this practical addition to their module and it encouraged them to reflect upon their experiences. There are, however, also indicators that the more careful embeddedness of the dance workshop into the module supports the intended learning outcomes. Since the the

introduction of the module, the quality of student coursework has continuously improved (the average grade has risen 8.45 % over the last three years). Comments during the most recent feedback sustain this observation, as they indicate that students critically reflected about their experiences, gained a more thorough knowledge about the different concepts of power, and that they began thinking about implications for world politics. In this feedback session, students for example shared their emotional experiences, stressing that the dance workshop had helped them to understand Arendt's notion of power. Working together successfully in concert enabled them to imagine possibilities of and spaces for cooperation in world politics, as students commented on how to strengthen cooperation in international organizations like the UN and, in light of the current European migrant crisis, they thought about ways to alleviate tensions between locals and refugees through personal engagement. This is further supported by student C in an e-mail from March 7, 2016:

I usually don't trust other people and today I had the chance to see how it feels to let someone else lead (...) I always have 1000 things on my mind and overthink everything and it was very refreshing to just let go of everything that I had on my mind. I just relaxed and enjoyed the moment.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, student D, an undergraduate dance student, wrote in an e-mail on the same day that

I discussed the sessions with [student E] afterwards and we agreed it was interesting working with non-dancers, especially since there were a few men and also people from all sorts of countries, which gave us a really diverse group to work with. I know it has been brought up before about trying to make connections across subjects and today I really felt that was present.

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<sup>2</sup> Ethical approval for this research project has been acquired following the standard university ethics procedure and students have given consent to be quoted in anonymised form.

Finally, as the module leader was also participating in the dance workshop, first-hand experience was gained to see if the movements help students to challenge common assumptions of power. This is possible because, by engaging with the workshop as an observant participant (Engelsrud 2007, 59), a changing of roles takes place that allows the module leader to distance himself from the intended learning outcome and focus on the dance experience as a learner. During the feedback session, the experiences of students can be compared to one's own, "trying to distinguish between what people say they do and what they actually do" (Moeran 2007, 13). Becoming a dance student during the workshop also helps to soften the hierarchical distinctions between the module leader and students, as they are not only materialized in spaces like lecture halls, but also embodied in our physical appearance (Cooper Albright 2013, 251). Trying to alleviate these hierarchies helps people to establish an active learning environment, as it encourages the establishment of a community of learners that consists of students and educators.

However, further qualitative and quantitative research is required to solidify the knowledge about the potential of contact improvisation for teaching IR and to establish if there is causality between dancing and a deeper learning experience. This research should ideally be part of a larger international project, involving universities globally. Using dancing as an IR teaching tool in a variety of settings to teach ethnically, culturally, socially, and religiously diverse groups of students would help to demonstrate if these promising experiences can be replicated, particularly in non-Western contexts, and to what extent they require adaption to these different settings. It would also allow scholars in these two fields – IR and dance – to develop a more coherent and comprehensive understanding of each other, enabling them to establish mutually profitable partnerships through which IR scholars and students can reconsider the scope of their discipline, while dance scholars and students can gain a deeper understanding of the political implications of dancing.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to make a contribution to a more inclusive IR teaching and provide for a more active learning experience, by incorporating dancing into IR curricula. Contact improvisation was chosen, as this modern egalitarian dance form

with its creative use of uncertainty is particularly apt in helping to achieve these ambitions.

On the one hand, contact improvisation allows lecturers to consider the learning requirements of kinesthetic students. It constitutes a practical element through which students can develop a more comprehensive understanding of world politics in their curriculum, as contact improvisation enables them to test and even challenge common concepts in the discipline, such as power. On the other hand, contact improvisation is also useful in providing for an active learning experience for all types of learners, as it helps students in their quest for building multimodal literacy, which is a necessary precondition to alleviate world political imaginations. Learning that the successful execution of contact improvisation movements requires the taking of responsibility and the building of trust among practitioners, students can understand that similar skills are required in critically contributing to the construction of their life-worlds. Equally, contact improvisation strengthens their self-criticality by considering the role of emotions in shaping their understanding of world politics and it fosters empathy for others, as they learn that differences do not have to be overcome, but they can constitute the basis for working in collectivity towards more humane world politics.

With this potential, contact improvisation eventually might contribute to IR's ambition to create impact beyond the disciplinary confinements and reach out pedagogically beyond the classroom. Indeed, dancing is for Oliver Marchart (2012, 102) a particularly apt way to achieve this ambition, as it epitomizes happiness as an essential element of political action. This is evidenced, for example, in the work of Kyung-Ah Na, Hyun-Jung Park, and Seok Jin Han (2016), in which they demonstrate that dance and IR can have a positive effect on otherwise marginalized people. Their experiences with dance workshops for female North Korean refugees is informative, as they highlight that bringing together local people and refugees in such workshops supports both groups in experiencing their different emotional worlds. In doing so, they can identify commonalities, rather than essentializing their differences. These workshops, therefore, contribute in avoiding processes of (self-)othering that potentially can cause violence. Furthermore, the combination of dance and IR can have a positive effect on foreign policy elites and other IR practitioners. As Sara Houston's (2009)

study on contact improvisation and prison inmates indicates, this combination of dance and IR can help to establish intellectual breathing spaces for its participants. This is because people with foreign policy responsibility are sensually and cognitively stimulated in such spaces to rethink common world political assumptions, as the performances in such workshops require participants to focus on the possibility of cooperation, rather than sparking rivalry.

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