Interactive Dance Lesson Plan

Interactive Dance is a fairly new type of performance--Live Action Set originally developed the work through a NET/TEN Travel Grant that allowed us to partner with Jeff Wirth of Interactive Playlab, a master of interactive acting techniques. Since then, we spent six months developing a full show of interactive dance for a weeklong run in Minneapolis, continued training our own ensemble, and, thanks to another NET/TEN Travel Grant, were able to collaborate with a new set of performers in LA. With this came a herculean task--how do we boil down what we've learned and developed in six months into a one-week crash course on interactive dance? What follows is a three-day lesson plan. Some vocabulary used is defined in the glossary that Live Action Set developed after our first NET/TEN Travel Grant on this subject.

DAY ONE:

GROUP SONG (15 minutes)
Inter-dancers lie on their backs in a circle, shoulder to shoulder, heads facing inwards. They are guided to take a few deep breaths together and, when it feels right, begin to improvise a group song with a clear beginning and a clear ending. Create 2-3 songs like this. Additional prompts may include to focus on percussive sounds, to claim and "hold onto" a part (soloist, harmony, percussion, “sound effects,” etc.), or to have the song go from one named emotion to another (anger to joy, for example).

After a brief physical warmup (5-10 minutes), inter-dancers pair up (partners can switch as often as is viable) for duet exploration.

SKIN/MUSCLE/BONE (15-20 minutes)
With their partner, dancers explore “skin” level contact--words to encourage this are soft, light, brushing, texture. Spend 2-3 minutes exploring.
With their partner, dancers explore “muscle” level contact--words to encourage this are dense, gooey, stretchy, elastic. Spend 2-3 minutes exploring.
With their partner, dancers explore “bone” level contact--words to encourage are gravity, weight, shape, solidity. Remind dancers that the skeletal system is great at supporting weight--both their own and others. Spend 2-3 minutes exploring.
Spend additional time allowing partners to move between skin, muscle, and bone contact.

BLIND DANCER (20-25 minutes)
One dancer is told to close their eyes and is given the instruction to move however they wish. The other dancer is tasked with keeping the blind dancer safe. After a few minutes, instruct the sighted dancer to not only keep the blind dancer safe, but to move/dance with them, in a way that encourages or enhances the movement they are doing.
Switch partners.
Repeat, but in groups of three, with one blind dancer and two sighted dancers. The sighted dancers must work together to achieve the blind dancer’s unspoken goal.

CREATING A DANCE--BLIND DANCER (10 minutes)
Begin one pair of dancers as a Blind Dancer exercise, with the rest of the ensemble observing, but ready to participate.
After a few minutes of duet, instruct the ensemble to enter the playspace and find a way to support the duet that’s occurring.
After a few minutes, instruct the bind dancer to open their eyes.
Encourage the ensemble to collectively find duets, trios, solos, and group movement, all in support of/inspired by the movement of the (formerly) blind dancer.

**CREATING A DANCE--FLOCKING (20 minutes)**
Divide the ensemble into 2-4 smaller groups (depending on the size of your ensemble; each group should have at least 3 members). Instruct the groups to begin to follow the movement of their “leader,” determined by whomever is visible to all of the group members (the leader will change as the group moves).
After a few minutes, give the instruction that, if groups come physically close to one another, members can choose who to follow.
After a few minutes, give the instruction that a single protagonist should emerge against the flock. How does the flock respond to this person?
After a few minutes, give the instruction that the protagonist can change—either because they decide to return to the flock, or because a new protagonist “takes” the lead.
Encourage the dancers to explore sound, to “follow” their leader in intention but not through exact mimicry, to know when a shift needs to encourage and take lead, and to find a few moments of perfect unison.
Instruct the ensemble to find an ending.

**DAY TWO:**

**GROUP SONG WARMUP (15 minutes)**

**FIRST CONTACT DRILL (15-20 minutes)**
Dancers pair up; one takes the role of inter-dancer, the other of spect.
The spect is told to stand alone, and do only what they want to do.
The inter-dancer is tasked with approaching the spect and making a physical offer (a gesture, a touch, a movement sequence) with the goal of getting the spect to engage and respond. The inter-dancer is should continue engaging with the spect until they’re told to stop.
Give a “go.” 20-30 seconds later, “stop.”
Switch roles and repeat.
Go back and forth 2-3 times. Pause, and ask what was most engaging for spect.
Repeat this cycle 3 or more times, honing in on what is successfully engaging.

**ECHO/RIPPLE/UNISON DANCE (20 minutes)**
From the Glossary:
**Echo:** In which unison is created through call-and-response. A “leader” proposes a movement, and the ensemble simultaneously repeats it. An excellent exercise to develop “group mind” in ensemble rehearsals, as well as a technique for playing with the spect.

**Ripple:** In which there is unison of movement, but not of timing. A “leader” proposes a movement, and the ensemble repeats the movement to a beat, but not simultaneously. In a seven-person group, a ripple sequence may look like:
**ORIGINAL MOVEMENT | A | B | C | D | E | F | or**
ORIGINAL MOVEMENT | A | B&C| | D | E&F | or
ORIINAL MOVEMENT | A | B&C&D | E&F | or any other variant.

Often “echos” will naturally turn to ripples over time. An excellent exercise to develop “group mind” in ensemble rehearsals, as well as a technique for playing with the spect.

Unison: The dancers all move in unison—either based on what the spect-dancer has offered, or because the spect is mimicking the inter-dancers. Unison is an accessible way for the spect to begin playing, and can make them feel “part of the group.”

Provide these definitions to the dancers and give a short example of each.
Then, with everyone up, instruct the dancers to move freely, improvising as they wish. Every 15-20 seconds, call out “echo,” “unison,” or “ripple”—the dancers must quickly agree on a leader to follow.
After a few minutes of this, encourage the dancers to improvise movement that is part echo/ripple/unison and part freeform (instructions like “90% unison, 10% freeform,” “50% echo and 50% freeform,” etc., are useful)—change which is the focus every few minutes.
After this, give the instruction that now ALL of the movement will either be a ripple, an echo, or unison (and switching between the three), as the group decides. Encourage them to be simple.
When this becomes easier, add in stage picture instructions—“when I clap, you’ll form a line/circle/diagonal.”
Instruct the group to find an ending.

CREATING A DANCE--EMOTIONAL ARC (20-25 minutes)
Divide the ensemble into two; one group will be dancing, one group observing. Solicit two emotions (for example, curiosity and sadness).
Instruct the dancing group to create a dynamic stage picture and start with the first emotion as inspiration. Instruct them that they will quickly find a protagonist character—this person should be their focus for the dance.
Instruct them to create a 6-7 minute (you will keep time) improvised dance using echo, ripple, unison, and dynamic stage pictures that focuses on the protagonist and creates an arc between the two emotions.
After the dance, have both groups give feedback about the experience. Pick two new emotions, switch groups, and repeat.

DAY THREE:

GROUP SONG (15 minutes)

FIRST CONTACT DRILL-variation (30 minutes)
Like yesterday’s first contact drill, but only one pair at a time will be up. Allow the interaction to continue for 2-3 minutes. After each interaction, ask the spect character what was most and least engaging, and ask the viewers what they saw.

STAGE PICTURE DRILL (20 minutes)
4 dancers will be up at a time (ensemble members can rotate in).
Instruct the first dancer to pick a spot on the stage and strike a pose.
The next dancer must enter and find a dynamic spatial/visual relationship to the first.
The third dancer enters and finds a dynamic spatial/visual relationship to the two.
The fourth dancer enters and finds a dynamic spatial/visual relationship to the three.
One at a time, the dancers will move about the space in response to the dancer who came immediately before them.
As the drill progresses, you can allow multiple dancers to move at once.
Every so often, pause; discuss what was interesting from the viewer’s perspective, and resume.

DANCER ENTRACE DRILL (40 minutes)
Begin in a similar way to the First Contact Drill—Variation, but have a second inter-dancer character “on deck.” Instruct them to find a moment to enter the dance—to change the stage picture, the emotional arc, disrupt or alter the relationship being formed, etc. These interactions will likely last 3-4 minutes each. Receive feedback from the spect character and viewers after each interaction.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER (15 minutes)
Solicit a spect (ideally, someone who has not been learning this process—someone from the administrative side of the organization, a friend or family member, etc.). Give them a “portal”—essentially, instructions that whatever they wish to do is correct, they can move how they want, and follow their impulses.
Begin with the spect and one inter-dancer, with the remaining inter-dancers on the side of the stage, ready to enter.
Begin music; the inter-dancer onstage will engage the spect. Instruct the other inter-dancers to enter when they feel it is right—encourage them to play with relationships, stage picture, ripple, echo, and unison.
The dance will last 6-10 minutes.