

Dance From Scratch

By Laura Brown and Stan Fowler

After years of observation, Park Ranger Stan Fowler asked himself how and when experienced dancers acquired their skills and which skill was the most important to acquire first for getting new dancers comfortable with the dance the quickest.

Fowler observed over the years that beginning contra dancers who managed to muddle through the dance reacted to actual floor conditions of music and dance by knowing where they needed to be and responding to the music and caller to be part of the dance, rather than getting the moves right. That's why we're teaching beginners how to persist under actual floor conditions in our workshop. We've basically just changed the order in which things are taught from focusing on mental skills first to focusing on movement skills first.

The philosophy behind the approach outlined below is to give new dancers courage and confidence to go out on the dance floor, make mistakes and still feel comfortable enough to persevere in the dance. The fundamentals of this method are based on John Krumm's work (*Weddings, Drunks & Children*). The proposed method outlined below, instead of teaching moves, helps new dancers learn how to get into the flow of the dance, how to listen and how to deal with chaos (things they've never encountered before).

The focus is not on teaching particular dance movements (except how to swing), but rather on getting the beginners used to listening, following directions, interacting with other people (holding hands!), learning how to progress, and making mistakes. And making mistakes.

Before anything happens, we turn on the music. As dancers gather, before the lesson begins, the music is playing in the background. Music sets the rhythm and the tone for the workshop. It builds anticipation and excitement and provides a welcoming atmosphere instead of a cold, empty hall with people milling around. (Glen Echo is quite cavernous.)

1. We Get the Dancers Moving

Merely teaching techniques does not give the dancers the confidence to apply them. The teacher builds skills for reacting, observing and listening. Newcomers are often overstimulated during a dance. Therefore, we create chaos during the workshop and lead them through figures without warnings. Before they know it they are dancing! This gives them permission to make mistakes in a venue that is safer than a dance.

When we get enough dancers to form a circle, we start without an introduction, except to welcome them and tell them our names. We turn the music up and get everyone to take hands. We say, "circle left," and then do so, without introductory remarks. We change direction at appropriate points in the music.

This exercise gives us information about the participants' observation and motor skills and how they respond to the music. We see if they are tense, and if we need to, we say something to get them to laugh and to relax.

We start calling to the phrases: circle left, circle right, into the middle, men to middle, women to middle.

2. We Segregate the Dancers

We circle left, then have everyone promenade single file in the same direction. We do not explain "promenade," we just start it and let everyone follow. We build confidence by allowing them to figure out what we mean and then doing it.

We ask the women to step into the center and promenade. Then the women go right while the men go left.

3. We Couple Up the Dancers

We ask the women fall in behind a man and promenade. We then take hands and circle left. We tell the men to notice that they have a woman on their right. We tell them to take this woman and promenade (in a circle). The teacher demonstrates; dancers learn by watching.

4. We Call Some Simple Moves for Couples

We call some moves: do-si-do your partner; allemande right your partner; allemande left your partner; promenade. Then we get them to progress: after a promenade (to make sure the woman is on the right and the man on the left), we say, turn your back on your partner. There's your neighbor. Do-si-do your neighbor. Take this one and promenade. This is your new partner. We repeat this a few times. We form a circle again and circle left, then have the man face his partner and pull by the right hand, do a right and left grand and when they reach their original partner, pull by one more and promenade with this new partner.

5. We Lead to a Contra Line

The teacher leads the circle around, then breaks and leads into a contra dance line. We ask them take hands four, and we give them some time to figure out what it means. We don't explain unless it's necessary. (Usually by this time a few more experienced dancers have appeared who help out.)

6. We Teach Them a Simple Dance

We call a very simple dance, for example the following one by John Krumm: Circle left, circle right, balance the ring, pass through. (Two's arch and one's duck through.)

We continue with our method of impulse teaching: we don't teach what a balance is unless they can't figure it out. If the dancing falls apart, we tell them that we can't believe they got this far

without falling apart. Then we say, Let's go back and we'll explain some things. We say, for example, "a balance is just a step into the ring and a step out of the ring."

What we are trying to teach here is: who the one's and two's are; the idea of progression; dancing to the phrases of the music; and orientation--where the music is.

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We ask them to take hands in long lines and go forward and back, then ask them all to step away from each other. Based on a method Fowler observed Bill Wellington using in the Ballroom back in 1988, we demonstrate how to ride the skateboard, broomstick horse or scooter. (Going in a straight line.)

We have fun with this! Then we recruit a volunteer; we scoot toward each other and do a buzz step swing with a turkey wing (catch right elbows and scoot). We tell them that we are not trying to go in a circle, but that the force of hooking elbows makes us (this helps them get the concept of giving weight without the mistake of "leaning backwards"). After "swinging" for about eight counts, we let go and scoot back to place.

We have them all try it, first the one's and then the two's. We "call" this part of the lesson so that they get more of a feel for listening to a caller.

Next, we demonstrate a swing in ballroom position by scooting toward each other, then connecting in ballroom position. We swing, let go and scoot back to place. Then we let them try it, first the one's and then the two's.

8. We Teach and Call a Simple Dance

We walk through and call a simple dance such as Jefferson's Sixpence while the music is going. (A1 Circle left, circle right. A2 DSD Neighbor, DSD partner. B1 F&B, One's swing, face down. B2 Down the hall. Back up. One's arch, two's duck through. By Ann Fallon.)

What we try to teach here is: where the sides of the lines are (make long lines at the sides, go forward and back); where across is; what happens at the bottom and top of a line; how a contra dance works; who their partner is; and who their neighbor is.

After the dance, we encourage everyone to thank their partners and find a new partner for the next dance.

9. We Teach Another Dance

We may teach a new figure or two, such as a Ladies' Chain, R&L through or a hey. The point of this is to continue building newcomers' confidence by adding an increasing level of complexity. We give them a minimal amount of mental information to absorb, and a slowly increasing amount of physical information to assimilate.

By this time, we usually have a number of more experienced dancers and late arriving newcomers joining the line, and we form two lines. Then we walk through and call another dance. We may welcome the "newer" newcomers and point out to the original newcomers that they are experienced dancers and they now have the added responsibility of make sure the new newcomers feel welcome to the dance. So in the course of 45 minutes we have tried to create all the elements of an actual dance in the class.

(For example, we might call "Made Up Tonight" by Erik Hoffman: A1 B&S Neighbor; A2 Women chain, chain back; B1 Circle left 3/4, swing partner {gent's side}; B2 Circle left 3/4 to original side, Bal. Ring, two's arch, one's duck through. Or we might call an even easier dance: "Babaloo's Reel": A1 LL F&B, LL F&B A2 Circle left, circle right B1 B&S neighbor B2 Women chain, chain back.)

10. We Give Them a Pep Talk

We ask all of the newcomers to gather round. We put the mike down. We have already created a relaxing atmosphere that alleviates newcomers' initial apprehensions about entering a big hall where they don't know what to expect. We answer any questions.

We tell them, "This workshop is designed to give you the skills you need to go out on the dance floor tonight and have a good time. But we haven't taught you all the moves. Part of the tradition is learning as you go. The caller will walk you through any new moves."

We conclude our lesson by giving them a few secret tips, making sure that none of the "regulars" are in the crowd. We tell them they are welcome to come back for another workshop next week. We point out that callers start the evening with the easiest dances and that they should hop right in for the first dance. We encourage them to dance with other people in addition to the ones they came with.

NOTE: We realize that not all dances get a large number of newcomers like Glen Echo does. When I have taught beginners' workshops elsewhere, I just move straight to step 6, "We Teach a Simple Dance." Then I try to stick to the rest of the format as much as possible. --LB

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Introduction

For the past 17 years, the National Park Service and the Friday Night Dancers have hosted one of the largest regularly scheduled contra dances in the country at Glen Echo Park's Spanish Garden Ballroom.

On average, 245 people attend the Friday night dance. Approximately 10 percent of those are new visitors to the Ballroom, providing us with one of the greatest opportunities of any contra dance in the country. To help our dance survive and even grow over the long term, we want to maximize the dance experience of everyone involved (regular dancers, organizers and beginners) with the least amount of inconvenience and disruption to the dance.

We want to put more priority on newcomers because those are the people we need--that any community group needs--to keep an event and a tradition going. Unfortunately, in the contra dance community, many dancers forget that first-timers are the ones who will support the event when they're gone (or when all of their friends have gone).

We also want new dancers to blend into the dance and mingle indistinguishably with experienced dancers as quickly as they can. We want to make it easy for the experienced dancers to help the beginners through the dance. And we want the experienced dancers to enjoy the dance, too.

Because our dances are held at a national park, we are also required to meet the expectations of the National Park Service. One of the mandates of the Park Service is visitor enjoyment of the resources, in this case, a very large, well-preserved dance floor. (Since 1911, the Ballroom has provided 7,500 square feet of maple dance floor.) The Park Service is particularly concerned that first-time visitors enjoy themselves.

Some Background

Over the past 12 years, the Friday Night Dancers have tested a variety of teaching methods and techniques, including offering a four-part monthly series. Recently, the Friday Night Dancers went back to a stand-alone workshop before the dance because the four-part series was excluding too many newcomers. Many visitors to the park would come to

the Friday dance in the middle of the month, hoping to join the beginners' lesson and gain an introduction to contra dancing. When they were not allowed to join the class in the middle or got into the class but could not keep up with the advanced level that night, they were discouraged. Many never came back.

The Saturday night dance program (couple dancing, including swing, Cajun and zydeco), which has always offered a one-time workshop, has many more first time visitors (150-400 per dance). Because the Saturday program offers couple dances, they are easily able to mainstream newcomers into the dance with a one hour workshop. The newcomers may not be able to execute all the fancy moves, but they don't need to. They know enough to have a good time by employing the limited number of moves they learned in the workshop and by dancing with other people close to their skill level.

In contra dancing, however, newcomers' frustration is higher because they have to do any move the caller chooses, whether they remember it or not, and they have to dance with everyone, including people who know all of the moves (and who might not be so understanding--another problem we need to deal with).

After observing over 3,000 dances of all types over 20 years at Glen Echo, including his children's workshops, Ranger Stan Fowler decided that there must be an easier way to mainstream newcomers into a contra dance their first night without extensive instruction. He asked himself how and when experienced dancers acquired their skills and which skill was the most important to acquire first for getting new dancers comfortable with the dance the quickest.

Analysis

Up to that point, dance organizers had assumed that what beginners needed was a mastery of dance vocabulary/moves and a cognitive understanding of the way the contra dance worked. Many workshops fill new dancers' heads full of terms and dance moves that they have to try to recall instantly in the dance to survive. But dancing isn't thinking; it's bodies responding instinctively to music and movement. In 1941, in his book *Swing Your Partners*, Durward Maddocks said "The caller should impress upon his beginners that the calls are the simplest, most natural way of explaining the movements. A beginner can complicate them if he tends to doubt his first quick impulse." And that is the thesis of our workshop, to give the newcomer the confidence to trust her/his first impulse.

Based on Stan Fowler's observations above, Laura Brown's work with senior citizens, John Krumm's workshop and pamphlet *Weddings, Drunks and Children*, and Larry Edelman's famous "chair exercise" the Friday Night Dancers evolved the following method of orienting beginning contra dancers in a 45 minute lesson before the dance. The method postulates that the quickest and most efficient way to introduce beginners to contra dancing is by building confidence and skills instead of teaching particular moves.

In addition to a large number of dance moves, experienced dancers understand the flow of the dance, possess good senses of timing, instinctively respond to calls without thinking and know where to go. It takes a number of dances before a new dancer can gain all of these skills. Which one of these skills is critical for the new dancers to acquire so they enjoy their first dance and want to come back? (And which part is most important so that the interactions between beginners and experienced dancers is smooth and congenial?)

Fowler postulates that most breakdowns in the contra dance line happen when newcomers hear a command that they've learned in the workshop, stop and try to remember what it is, but then it's too late. By the time they remember the move, the dance has already broken down.

Some people in the dance community who have also identified this problem want contra dancing to imitate ballroom dance and club square dancing. They suggest that people should take lessons for weeks or months before they're allowed out on the dance floor with experienced dancers. Even when this is not expressed overtly, it is obvious in various parts of the country that this attitude is hidden beneath the veneer of the dance. Newcomers are discouraged, for example, from dancing in the center line by a stampede which monopolizes the space before applause for the band and caller has even stopped. As early as 1946, a dancer in a letter to Ralph Page identified this problem: "There was a regular hierarchy on the floor, nothing short of a caste system."

This reasoning may have dire consequences for our community. If we follow this line of thinking and require extensive training for beginners, we will end up like the club square dancers: 60 to 80 years old, with no new blood, bickering amongst ourselves, requiring levels and certification and hours of training before anyone is allowed into our dance. This is the point where a social and community event turns into a recreational event no different from bowling leagues. The dance would no longer be a vibrant, living tradition, where people and the social community are the important part of the event. This spelled death for club squares.

The Method

The proposed method outlined below, instead of teaching moves, helps new dancers learn how to get into the flow of the dance, how to listen and how to deal with chaos (things they've never encountered before). If you've ever watched first time dancers, you've probably noticed that some of them are anxious about getting things right. This is mostly because we throw a whole bunch of things at them in a workshop and tell them that they need to learn all these things. If they are thrown into a line with some hostile experienced dancers (beware the center line!), they can grow even more anxious. Beginning dancers are not going to be able to memorize a bunch of figures and remember them all in one hour. In fact, it's only going to confuse them.

Fowler observed over the years that beginning contra dancers who managed to muddle through the dance reacted to actual floor conditions of music and dance by knowing where they needed to be and responding to the music and caller to be part of the dance, rather than getting the moves right. That's why we're teaching beginners how to persist under actual floor conditions in our workshop. We've basically just changed the order in which things are taught from focusing on mental skills first to focusing on movement skills first.

We hope that this means more new dancers will be able to enjoy an evening of dance from their first very first dance, without having to worry about whether they are getting the moves right. After all, as an experienced dancer, wouldn't you rather have new dancers in the right place at the right time instead of having them worry about executing a perfect ladies' chain with two twirls that puts them behind the music?

We try to create a relaxed and humorous atmosphere in our classes, allowing beginners to make mistakes in a safe environment. Even though the atmosphere of the class is casual, we do put the newcomers under some stress. At first, they don't know what is coming at them or when. We create an atmosphere that forces mistakes. They just need to be prepared to respond and do their best. This is what we want them to do in the actual dance. After the class, we tell them that we have given them the basic tools they need to understand the dance and that the other stuff will come as they attend more dances. We don't want newcomers to go away overwhelmed or disappointed because they didn't learn every move in the dance. The workshop gives them permission to feel confident, make mistakes, recover without freezing and continue to dance and have fun.

The skills beginners need to hone are very basic and almost instinctive: ear-body coordination and awareness of their physical environment,

including auditory commands and music. The basic lesson that we want to teach is that they need to watch and quickly go where they see everyone else going. We only teach them a few basic movements and positions of the dance during our short workshop.

Secret Details of this Method

Introduction to the Method

Since the fall of 1997, we have used this method to teach a number of beginning classes, including the Friday night dance at Glen Echo as well as other local dances. We have gotten good feedback from participants, dance organizers, dance callers and experienced dancers.

What follows is a detailed description of our method. We hope that you are willing to open your mind to the possibilities of this slightly modified method and employ it the next time you are called upon to teach beginners. Or that you suggest it to the dance organizers in your area. We think it can make a big difference in improving the quality of the dance and in increasing the ranks of dancers.

Our Method

The philosophy behind the approach outlined below is to give new dancers courage and confidence to go out on the dance floor, make mistakes and still feel comfortable enough to persevere in the dance. The fundamentals of this method are based on John Krumm's work (*Weddings, Drunks & Children*). The focus is not on teaching particular dance movements (except how to swing), but rather on getting the beginners used to listening, following directions, interacting with other people (holding hands!) and making mistakes. And making mistakes.

Before anything happens, we turn on the music. As dancers gather, before the lesson begins, the music is playing in the background. Music sets the rhythm and the tone for the workshop. It builds anticipation and excitement and provides a welcoming atmosphere instead of a cold, empty hall with people milling around. (Glen Echo is quite cavernous.)

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When we get enough dancers to form a circle, we start without an introduction, except to welcome them and tell them our names. We turn the music up and get everyone to take hands. We say "circle left" and start circling without further ado. We change direction at appropriate points in the music.

This exercise gives us information about the participants' observation and motor skills and how they respond to the music. We see if they are tense, and if we need to, we say something to get them to laugh and to relax.

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4. We Call Some Simple Moves for Couples

We call some moves: do-si-do your partner; allemande right your partner; allemande left your partner; promenade. Then we get them to progress: after a promenade (to make sure the woman is on the right and the man on the left), we say, turn your back on your partner. There's your neighbor. Do-si-do your neighbor. Take this one and promenade. This is your new partner. We repeat this a few times. We form a circle again and circle left, then have the man face his partner and pull by the right hand, do a right and left grand and when they reach their original partner, pull by one more and promenade with this new partner.

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We also may give a brief history of our dance community. "This dance is co-sponsored by the Friday Night Dancers and the National Park Service. The Friday Night Dance is a community of people, some who've been dancing here for 20 years, some who just came last week for the first time. There has been dancing on this site since 1911. The kind of dancing we're doing tonight--contra dancing--has been done here since 1977."

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