Different Not Destructive
Barry Clasper
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Introduction

Past offerings of sessions on this topic have often been titled "Different But Not Difficult". That title is actually something of a non sequitur. "Different" is usually a major contributor to "difficult". Dance situations which are unusual are almost always more difficult than those that are familiar. After watching a number of presenters try to square that circle, I decided to come at it from a different angle.

Let's first accept the fact that choreography that is different will always, at least initially, carry a higher level of difficulty than the more familiar. This helps to frame the issue in more productive ways, such as:

1. How do we assess and manipulate (i.e. manage) the difficulty when exposing dancers to something unfamiliar?

2. How do we go about developing different material and ideas that will be out of the ordinary, but not out to lunch?

Managing Difficulty

The first step in managing difficulty is understanding where it comes from. In 1982 John Sybalsky wrote an excellent article titled "What Makes Square Dancing Hard?" It does an excellent job of describing the mental processing that Square Dancing demands and how much difficulty those demands present for most of us. (You can find a copy of John's article at http://fortytwo.ws/~cbaker/what-makes-square-dancing-hard.pdf). Towards the end of the article John lists a number of elements that contribute to difficulty. The first three could easily be combined and paraphrased as "unfamiliarity". The less experience dancers have with a call, doing the call from a given formation, or doing the call from a given position, the more difficult it will seem to them.

John describes a number of other contributors to difficulty, but for the purposes of this discussion, we're just going to look at the element of unfamiliarity. In order to do that we first need to think about how dancers process calls and determine what to do in response.

What Is A Mental Model?

Our brains our organized for two types of thinking: slow and fast. Slow thinking is the product of our conscious, rational mind. It operates by logically analyzing situations, weighing pros and cons, determining logical conclusions, and making rational choices. Fast thinking is the province of a powerful pattern-matching engine variously called the "adaptive unconscious" or, more simply, "System 1". System 1 continuously monitors our surroundings for patterns, evaluates what they might mean, and makes recommendations to our conscious selves (termed "System 2" in this idea of how our minds are organized). The results of System 1 activity typically emerge into our conscious minds as impulses to act, answers to a problem, or conclusions about what a situation represents to us. These results usually emerge unbidden, without our conscious effort, and virtually instantaneously.

When System 1 detects a pattern, it's used as a search key into the storehouse of information we have in our brain to fetch all the information we have relating to that pattern. In the case of a square dancer who hears a call, the name of the call plus other inputs describing what is happening right now becomes the key to retrieving everything the dancer knows about that call. What the dancer knows about the call constitutes their *mental model* of the call.

Different Not Destructive … cont'd

Call Decoding

A phrase we hear often is "Dance By Definition", usually referring to choreography that is difficult and challenging. The implication is that requiring dancers to dance according to the definition of the call is intrinsically hard. This has always puzzled me. How else could dancers possibly dance? If they had no "definition" for the call, no description or set of instructions that explained what to do when they hear it, how would they know what to do? It seems obvious that every dancer must dance every call by definition, every time. They are using the definition in their head – their *mental model* of the call – to figure out what to do.

The question is - *what is that definition?* Most assuredly, it is *not* the definition written in our definition documents (especially since very few dancers have ever read our definition documents). Instead, their mental model of the call is an aggregate of all their accumulated experience with the call, starting with how it was first taught to them and then later modified or reinforced by each subsequent encounter with the call. You might be thinking that this mental model is an abbreviated synopsis of the call definition – a sort of mental quick reference brochure. In fact, the opposite is true.

The typical mental model carries far more detail than the written definition. For example: what calls typically precede or follow the call; what relationship they should have with their partner or others in the square before, during, and after the call; how they can expect other dancers to be moving during the call; what hands they can expect to use during the call; who they can expect to meet or follow during the call; what body flow they are likely to have before and after the call; an impression of what a "correct" result should be; …. and much more.

So, that should all be to the good, right? The more information dancers have about the call, the better able they should be to execute it, right? Well, not necessarily. The problem is, in many cases a lot of the information dancers gather in their mental models is either irrelevant, misleading, or just plain wrong. That is because most of it comes from unconscious inferences they have drawn from their experience with the call, as opposed to overt teaching sessions.

What are the general steps dancers go through to "decode" a call – that is, determine what they are going to do?

- Many of the cues dancers include in their mental models are associated with their immediate environment, for example: the program they are dancing, the habits of the caller they are dancing to, what has happened in the last few sequences, what call is under execution now, where they expect to be at the end of the current call, etc. All of these factors will influence how the call they hear will be processed through their mental model. Dancers' System 1s are continuously monitoring their immediate environment for cues that might be relevant to decoding the next call. Unfortunately, past experience may lead some dancers to be influenced by cues that are actually irrelevant to the call. One common error is to concern themselves with dancers who are not actually part of the group doing the call with them. For example, the call Slide Thru involves only 2 people, yet many dancers will adjust their final facing direction based on the all-8 setup instead of the 2-person setup they are actually working with.
- Upon hearing the call, dancers' minds automatically go through a pattern-matching exercise using their mental model of the call. They combine the environmental cues with what their mental model says about how the call works and, if the match is successful, find out what they need to do to execute the call.
- During call execution, dancers' minds continue to compare what is actually happening to what their mental model leads them to expect. Are they using the hands they expect to use, meeting the people they expect to meet, moving in the direction they expect to move, etc.? If not, they will begin evaluating whether they have misunderstood something and perhaps take what they believe to be necessary corrective action.
- At the end of the call, dancers will compare the result with the result predicted by their mental model and perhaps do something to correct an unexpected result.

Managing the Difficulty of Unfamiliarity

Given this view of how each dancer decodes calls, we can construct a hierarchy of the difficulty associated with unfamiliarity, from easiest to most difficult:

1. **Vanilla (i.e. Standard):** The processing through the dancer's mental model immediately produces a clear and complete set of instructions as to what to do, and the execution and final result of the call are accurately predicted by the model. Smooth execution to the music is the result.

2. **A Bit Different:** The processing produces clear information, but with some delay, such as might happen with a call that is not used often. The usual result is smooth execution after a short hesitation.

3. **Different But Doable:** The immediate result of the processing is incomplete in some way – for example, the formation or the dancer's position in it is not recognized – but which can be accurately completed using other information in the mental model. This is a case of "I've never seen it from *there* before, but I can figure out what to do". The usual result is hesitation while the dancer figures out what should happen followed by a ragged or deliberate execution.

4. **Different And Destructive 1:** The processing produces information that seems at odds with what is happening on the floor. The dancer feels something is "wrong". This usually results either in the dancer abandoning execution or making an adjustment so things seem "right". This is actually more of a problem for you than the dancers – they think they're right, but you get random results to work with.

5. **Different And Destructive 2:** The dancer has no mental model for the call (has never heard it before) or their mental model has insufficient information to allow any execution in the current circumstances. Squares are broken, dancers may feel inadequate or victimized.

Clearly, we want to keep our choreography in the area of the first three categories above, and manage our excursions beyond "vanilla" to a level the dancers won't find overwhelming. This is much more easily said than done. The lines between these categories are different for every dancer, and for every floor. As callers it is our non-trivial task to discover where those lines are for the people we are calling to and adjust our choreography accordingly. In years past, there were several presentations titled "Sussing The Floor" that discussed techniques for "reading" the floor and finding where these lines are. The handouts for those sessions are available in the Members Corner of the CALLERLAB website.

Further complicating this situation, but fortunately in a useful way, is the fact that the lines between categories can be *moved by the caller in real time.* For example, something that is *a bit different* can be rendered *vanilla* simply with a bit of repetition. Repetition removes the element of unfamiliarity. Categories 4 and 5 can also be downlisted to something non-destructive by providing additional information in the form of cues. For category 4, the caller can reassure the dancers that despite the feeling of "wrongness" they are in the right place. For category 5, the caller can use cues to reduce it to a category 3. And, in extreme cases, the caller can overtly workshop material using explanations and walk-thrus.

Approaches For "Different But Not Destructive"

The above discussion pointed out where the lines between *different* and *destructive* lie and how it is possible to move the positioning of the lines for any given dance floor. Before you can assess where the lines are, or work with the floor to move them, you first have to come up with some choreography that is different or unusual. This section suggests some generic approaches that can help you design more creative choreography.

Different Not Destructive … cont'd

First – What <u>Not</u> To Do

Do NOT read the written definition looking for obscure loopholes you can use to "fool" dancers. Dancers seldom find this entertaining. Until you get to Challenge dancing, few dancers have ever read the written definition (and even at Challenge there are many who have not). You have to work with what the dancers have in their heads.

For individual dances, avoid situations were extensive "muscle memory" has to be undone before success is possible. In general, dancers who have not been repetitively exposed will have difficulty with things like Left Recycle, Reverse Dixie Style, Pass The Ocean from sashayed couples, etc. Undoing that kind of muscle memory usually requires a great deal of drill and usually is not well received outside of a workshop or class.

Look For Common Combinations – And Change Them

There are a lot of call combinations that are extremely common. What comes after "Put Centers In"? Look for these common combinations – whether they are universally common, or simply things you use frequently yourself – and think of ways to inject other calls. For example, why not "Put Centers In, Centers Trade"? Of course, you need to adjust your delivery to allow dancers time to realize they are not hearing the usual combination, but once they become accustomed, such things can be called and danced smoothly.

Look For Situations You Avoid – And Figure Out How To Use Them

For many, the answer to my earlier question "Why not Put Centers In, Centers Trade?" would be: "Because that gives you inverted lines – what do I do with them?" There are lots of things, actually, and many of them are not hard at all after the dancers have gotten over the surprise of not doing a Cast ¾ after a Centers In. You could start with things as simple as Centers Pass Thru or Ends UTB and progress to harder things – like Cast Off ¾.

Look For Easy Non-Standard Applications

The Standard Applications books do a nice job of documenting what "vanilla" is. By implication (or sometimes outright declaration) they also tell you what dancers find unusual. Many such non-standard applications are not actually hard, they are merely not used very much. A bit of repetition is often all that is needed to move them down a category in the hierarchy of difficulty. For example, many floors are more successful with Zoom from a Beginning DPT than a Completed DPT. The only thing rendering the second harder than the first is frequency of exposure.

Use Low Frequency Calls More Often

There are calls on every list that are seldom used and therefore their use is, by definition, different. Turn Thru would be a good example. Further, each one of us has calls on every list that we seldom use – sometimes because we just don't like the call, and sometimes because it just doesn't occur to us very often as we create choreography. Focusing on such calls can open new choreographic veins to be mined.