

Teaching Outside of the Box

We callers tend to teach calls the way we were taught. Why not, it worked for us? Sometimes we need to explore other ways of presenting and teaching calls.

First, try working in other formations, such as 2 couples, big circles, Sicilian Circles (a circle of pairs of facing couples looking either clockwise or counter clockwise), Contra lines, and/or rectangles (6 couple groups with double sets of Head couples. These formations can free the caller/teacher from the need for even groups of 8. If the caller/teacher likes to use angels, other formations can allow more angels to mix with the students. If there are too many dancers to make one square, but not enough to make 2 squares, two couple sets, a Contra line or a rectangle will allow all the students to dance. Big circles or Sicilian Circles are good for larger groups. These other formations will help the student dancers to feel comfortable in other formations.

Another way to think out of the box is to change the way a call is taught. I have 4 calls as examples.

Grand Square:

We usually teach Grand Square and Reverse Grand Square at one time, which is how we dance the call. Consider, however that the dancers have twice as many chances to become disoriented if we have then dance the full pattern right away. I have found that doing what I think of as 1/2 Grand Square, for certain groups, helps them to succeed more easily. I mean 16 steps, back to home but without the reverse that we are used to. After the dancers become comfortable with that pattern, then the caller/teacher can have the Heads Face and reverse Grand Square. Then the caller/teacher can have the student dancers dance the whole pattern.

I personally like practicing "Turn" and "Walk" from a square set first. I have the Sides turn 1/4 to face their partner and then practice having all dancers turn 1/4 to face either their partner or opposite (depending upon whom they were facing). Then I have the dancers walk forward or back, depending on whether they were farther away or close to the person they were facing.

Square Thru:

The same theory can be applied to Square Thru - teach it in parts to help prevent the built-in pitfalls, instead of teaching the whole call and then breaking it down into parts. Using 2 couple sets, I start with Square Thru 1 hand, which is just a right hand to the opposite and ("pull") walk by. I emphasize that no one turns after the "pull" by because you only turn to continue the call and one hand of the square thru is complete. I also stress that dancers finish the last hand of a Square Thru back to back with the last person they touched. (If you know the group, you could have them back up and check.)

Once the dancers have done a Square Thru one hand several times, you can have them turn 1/4 to face the person next to them and continue the Square Thru by giving left hands and "pulling" by. It is important to tell the dancers that they will sometimes be using one hand and turning the other way to find the next person. Have the dancers practice Square Thru 2 for the rest of the evening.

In another lesson, you can add Square Thru 3 and practice for a tip. Finally, walk the dancers through Square Thru 4, informing them that without a number, the caller expects 4 hands. Remind dancers throughout the process that they will only turn 1/4 to face the dancer next to them if they need to continue another hand.

Please Note: this process does not eliminate the dancers turning the "wrong" way (the way that feels good), but it can help the dancers succeed.

Star Thru

I have found it easier to teach Star Thru in a big circle, either all the couples or a full square. I have the dancers turn to face their corner and with the hand that is now towards the center of the circle, point towards the center of the circle. This will automatically have the dancers using the Ladies' Left hand and the Gents' Right hand. Then I direct the dancers to use those same arms and touch palms with their corner to form an arch. Then I direct the Ladies to walk under the arch and turn to face the center of the circle while the Gent walks to the outside and also faces the center of the circle. The extra room and the fact that dancers are not thinking about left and right seems to make the call easier to teach from there. When the caller/teacher uses the call in facing couples, there is muscle memory to help in the tighter space.

Lead Right

I start by having every couple face the caller/music wall with space around them. Then I tell the dancers their goal is to take a small step forward and turn as a couple $1/4 / 90$ degrees to face the wall to their right. I try to use some feature on that wall such as a picture, window, flag etc. to help identify it to the dancers. Next I have the dancers again turn as a couple with a small step forward to face the "back" wall. That would of course be the wall the caller is facing. I have them repeat this process 2 more times until they are again facing front to the caller. Then I have the dancers square up and have either the Head or Side couples lead right, emphasizing that the people on the left of the couple (Boys) must take care to pass left shoulders as the couple turns $1/4$ or 90 degrees to the right.

Thinking out of the box can help with incorporating student dancers into the club. Because of circumstances, our home club (Rutgers Promenaders) teaches lessons on the same day they dance. The club is a family club which dances 1st and 3rd Sunday afternoons. We hold class for 1 hour prior to the dance and then call tips alternating between full Mainstream and whatever the class has covered.

The dancers in the club have supported the idea by both coming early (when they can) to help with lessons and dancing the "all skate" class tips. Not everyone dances every tip, but the class dancers do not have to wait to have someone fill their square. This is very important, because if the experienced dancers sit and watch, the new dancers do not feel included in the group.

To make this work, callers need to practice routines and patterns (including singing calls) which use limited groups of Basic calls, so that every tip feels like a dance. Experienced club members need to reach out to the new dancers by joining them in a square or changing partners for a tip so that all the new dancers do not cluster together. Also, the two groups can socialize during and after the dance.

If the group cooperates, this format can greatly ease the transition from class to club. The classes have been small, but we have close to 100% retention and the club is growing.

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