

TEACHING TECHNIQUES

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching is one of the most important jobs of any caller. We should be prepared to undertake this task each time we pick up our microphone. Teaching can be as formal as a regular class or workshop situation or as informal as a discussion of a particular move or concept over coffee after a dance. Teaching people to dance is not only one of our most important skills, it is also one of the most difficult.

Teaching people to do something is not an easy task. Teaching them properly is even harder. Unfortunately, few callers receive extensive training in the techniques and skills required to properly teach people to dance. Most callers apply teaching techniques through trial and error. Very few have been given this extremely important skill as part of their caller training. Most who have been fortunate enough to acquire this type of training have received it outside their caller training experience. The sad thought here is how many drop outs could have been prevented by improving caller training to include a comprehensive study of the skills needed to properly train others?

Many callers simply teach the way they were taught. In some cases this may provide a good learning experience for students while in other cases the students will be confused or frustrated. This confusion and frustration can severely hinder learning. The result can very easily be poorly trained dancers.

In some cases the job of training new dancers is left in the hands of our newest and most inexperienced callers. Even though many successful callers got started this way, most callers agree this is not the best situation.

Becoming an effective teacher requires development of three general skills: 1) knowledge of what is to be taught, 2) an understanding of how people learn what is to be taught, and 3) the ability to convey knowledge and skill from the teacher to the students. All of these skills can and should be studied before the teacher steps in front of a group of students. Application of these skills in actual training situations provides the experience necessary to become an effective teacher. Increase in teacher effectiveness can lead to greater new dancer success and retention

A very constructive way to gain teaching experience is for the student caller to monitor a class taught by an experienced teacher and then to teach a class under the guidance of an experienced caller/teacher. This type training program helps establish a firm base upon which the new caller can build his/her teaching skills.

This paper has been prepared to provide some basic information about the methods teachers can use when they teach others. It is intended as both a starting point for new callers and as a refresher for experienced caller/teachers.

BASICS OF TEACHING/LEARNING

A teacher should be familiar not only with the material to be taught, but also with the way people learn what is to be taught. Most callers are familiar with the material they are teaching; many refer to the definition of a move before teaching it. Because teaching is such an important part of the job of a caller, anytime spent studying how people learn, including effective teaching methods, will be effort very well spent.

The topics discussed in this section are rather generic and can be applied to most teaching situations.

How People Learn

Depending on the thing to be learned, people learn in different ways. The methods available are: 1) observing, 2) listening, 3) reading, and 4) doing. Some people learn better from one method while others learn better from a completely different method. Because of the difference in the way people learn, callers should present information using these various methods.

Most people learn to 'know' something in a different way from the way they learn to 'do' something. Learning to know something is most often accomplished by one or more of the first three methods noted above. Students can, very often, gain an understanding of the action in a particular move by the first three methods. However, since learning to square dance requires students to actually perform a physical motion, a considerable amount of 'doing' is required. In order to provide adequate training the students must not only have an understanding of the basic action of the moves, but they must also actually do the action. The automatic reaction required for smooth dancing is developed by repetition of the moves during the teaching process.

Learning Speed

Each person learns at a different speed. It may take some people five or Six times as long to learn a given skill than it takes others. This is why It is important for student dancers to learn the exact and total definition of each move they learn (including styling and timing). Even though they will not learn to actually dance each move from all allowable Formations and Arrangements, they still need to be aware that such other applications exist and are "legal".

Positive/Negative Transfer

When people learn something well, they are often able to apply this knowledge when learning something new. This process is called "transfer" and it occurs very often in square dancing. This is why it is easier for students to learn WEAVE THE RING after they have learned RIGHT AND LEFT GRAND, and why SWING THRU and LEFT SWING THRU are much easier to teach (learn) after the students have mastered ALAMO SWING THRU and LEFT SWING THRU from an Alamo Ring.

Instructors need to be aware, however, that the ability to transfer knowledge from one learning experience to another may sometimes produce a reverse or negative effect. This is particularly true in an activity such as square dancing where there are many similar things to learn. Many moves have the same basic traffic pattern and can be very easily confused. This is why some dancers confuse WALK AND DODGE with SCOOT BACK and why some Boys try to COURTESY TURN the Girls as part of a SQUARE THRU. Additionally, the name of some moves may sound similar to other moves. For instance, SPIN CHAIN THRU, SPIN CHAIN THE GEARS, and SPIN CHAIN AND EXCHANGE THE GEARS. In these cases the name or the 'dance feel' of the move already learned may hinder learning the new move

Instructors can use the power of knowledge transfer to good advantage by building on previously learned moves. However, as shown above the instructor must always be aware of the danger of negative transfer and be ready to counter its effect on the students. A good way to do this is to separate similar feeling and similar sounding moves from each other by at least 3-4 sessions. This separation will allow the positive transfer to help teach and learn of the new move.

The Effect of Errors

Learning to square In many applications people learn from their mistakes, but this is not always true when dance. This is because we dance by executing the moves more or less automatically. This automatic reaction is achieved through repetition. If this repetition is flawed, then the automatic reaction will be wrong.

Because of this, the instructor must be aware of the students' actions during the early phase of learning any new move. The dancers must be given adequate error free repetition or "perfect practice" during this initial learning stage. Any move which is practiced incorrectly will result in inaccurate execution. Un-doing the effects of incorrect execution takes considerably more time than the initial teach. Therefore, the best advice is, teach it right the first time.

TEACHING METHODS

There are several effective methods which may be used to teach people to square dance. Most of these have been used for years with great success. Any caller desiring to learn or improve teaching techniques can benefit from a study of the following methods.

Big Circle Teaching

Many moves can be taught in a big circle and in the early stage of beginner class this method has become traditional. When using the big circle method all dancers can join in the circle without waiting for 3 more couples. The caller has the advantage of being able to stand in the middle of the circle, thus focusing the attention of the students on the actions and words of the instructor.

The big circle may be set up in three different ways. First, a single circle with alternating boys and girls all facing in toward the center; second, concentric circles, men in one and ladies in the other, the outside circle facing in toward the center and the inside circle facing out; and finally, the circle may consist of facing couples, one couple facing clockwise and the other facing counter-clockwise. The facing couples can also be set up as concentric circle with the couple on the inside facing out and the couples on the outside facing in.

The three types of Big Circles can be used as follows:

- a. Single Circle (all facing in) - use to teach circle and single couple type moves. These include CIRCLE LEFT, CIRCLE RIGHT, ARM TURNS, PARTNER SWING, STAR THRU, CALIFORNIA TWIRL, PROMENADE, and other single couple type moves.
- b. Concentric Circles (boys in one, girls in the other) - this set-up is very popular for mixers.
- c. Facing Couples (Concentric Circle or couples facing clockwise and counter) - use for two couple moves. One way to set up this type Big Circle is to have every other couple WHEEL AROUND from a COUPLES PROMENADE. From couples facing clockwise and counter clockwise, the move Pass Thru can be used to move dancers to dance with other couples.

A variation of the Big Circle is to establish Contra Lines. These are facing lines which can be set up either as facing couples or with the boys in one line and girls in the other. The most common way to set up the Contra Lines is with the lines running up and down the hall.

Two Couple Teaching

Over half of all moves through the Plus program can be taught using only two couples. These moves can be taught either in a Big Circle as described above or in "mini-squares" with only two couples. One way to set up two couple or "mini-square" teaching is to simply have the dancers form two couple squares with one couple with their back to the caller and the other couple facing the caller. One advantage of this method is that all dancers are receiving simultaneous practice without the distraction of other non-active dancers. Many callers use this method to start the first tip of a class session, while dancers are still arriving. One advantage of this is that more couples can dance, even if there are not enough for full squares. When the dancers are familiar with the action of the move in the mini-square environment, the caller can call "PASS THRU and SCATTER PROMENADE" to form four couple regular squares.

Using Demonstrations

Many times an effective demonstration is an excellent way to introduce new moves. This is particularly true during the early stage of the new dancers' learning experience. Using a demonstration couple to show the action of the move will allow the students to learn in two ways. First, they will hear the definition (learning by listening) and second, they will see the action (learning by observing). This will help reenforce the listening skills they will need throughout their dancing lives.

Using a demonstration to show one or two couple moves is more effective than moves requiring all four couples. For instance, showing moves like SLIDE THRU, PARTNER TRADE, TOUCH 1/4, PARTNER SWING, RIGHT & LEFT THRU, and FLUTTER WHEEL is much more effective than showing moves like SPIN CHAIN THRU or RELAY THE DEUCEY. This is because of the complexity of the moves requiring all four couples and the difficulty in following the action. This is not very limiting, however, since most moves can be shown and taught with one or two couples.

Teaching by Definition

The art of an effective caller/teacher often lies in the ability to describe, in the simplest terms possible, the action of the moves. This skill is especially critical when a caller chooses to teach a move without the benefit of a demonstration. The caller must paint in the mind's eye of the students, a vivid and graphic word picture of the move's action. The use of comparisons can be very effective; for instance, when we compare the action of a RIGHT AND LEFT GRAND to that of climbing a rope.

For example, even though a caller may not actually teach WHEEL AND DEAL from lines facing in, the students need to be taught in a way that does not exclude this application. This same principal must be applied to all moves taught. Teaching by definition requires that callers describe each move's action as precisely as possible. Except in the case of the few gender oriented moves (STAR THRU, BOX THE GNAT, SLIDE THRU) the definition should include a description of the action in terms of ends/centers, insides/outside, leaders and trailers, etc, rather than the action of the boys and girls.

As a minimum, every move taught should be shown, taught, and practiced from the most common starting Formations and Arrangements. A listing of the most common applications is contained in the STANDARD APPLICATIONS books compiled by the Choreographic Applications Committee and available from the CALLERLAB office.

Some students can master a certain move with only a little practice while others need 20-30 repetitions to master the same move. Because of the tremendous amount of material we expect new dancers to learn, this can lead to drop out of the students who do not learn as quickly as the rest of the group. This does not mean these dancers can not succeed, it merely means it will take them longer and they will require more practice to learn to dance.

Unfortunately, many of them drop out before they are provided the practice they need to learn to dance. A solution to this situation, although it is rarely used, is to provide a second class for these students to attend.

Teachers should be aware that while some students will remember most of what was presented from one session to the next, there are others who will have forgotten at least some (if not most) of the material. When we add the fact that at any particular session there may be students who missed the last session, the importance of review cannot be over emphasized. Just because a move was presented, practiced, and danced during a particular class session, there is no guarantee it will be retained by the class. Generally, it is a good idea to include, during the first and second tip of the class session, a review of the most recent move(s) presented.

The entire class can also have a session where hardly anything can be learned. During these class sessions the instructor should be prepared to abandon the lesson plan for that session and simply provide a review or 'fun night'. This will decrease the stress of not progressing not only for the students, but for the instructor as well. Callers who are not able to adjust their planned lesson for these situations will most assuredly frustrate at least some of the students.

No learning experience for any group progresses in an upward curve but generally occurs in spurts with intervals during which the students should be given the opportunity to practice the material they have already learned. The use of programmed "review/dance" sessions provide the opportunity to relax and have fun with the material already learned.

Talk-Thru/Walk-Thru Techniques

The students need to experience the flow of each move taught. Many callers provide dancers with a feel of the dance action of a new move by using moves previously learned. This allows the students to experience the body flow, hand usage, facing direction, distance, etc. of the move before hearing the name. This method of introducing new moves requires the caller to do considerable homework to determine which basics can be combined to show the new move. Most callers who use this method agree it can reduce the time it takes to introduce a new move. An added benefit is that it also provides additional practice with the moves used to show the action of the new move.

The actual introduction of the new move almost always begins with a Talk-Thru and Walk-Thru in which the dancers are directed through the move's action so that each can experience the physical nature of the dance action.

The first step is for the caller to dance the dancers to the starting position and say "Stop!", then stop the music. This sudden interruption will immediately bring the student's full attention to the caller. At this point the caller will announce that they are about to learn a new move. The caller then begins the Talk-Thru/Walk-Thru process. This is where the caller explains the action of the move and then requires the dancers to physically follow the instructions.

During this phase, the caller can include smooth dancing tips as well as the definition of the action. The caller must be especially watchful during the walk thru to ensure the students are in fact getting through the action absolutely error free and using smooth dancing tips. This error free practice is a critical factor in effective teaching and is the only way students will properly learn the moves

Repetition and Drill

Since square dancing is a "motor skill" it can only be learned through direct personal experience. It helps to watch others perform the skill, it helps to hear the caller describe how the skill is performed, and it also helps to analyze written definitions and pictures. The only effective way to really learn how to perform the skill, however, is to actually do it This experience typically starts with a "talk-thru", then a "walk-thru" as described above.

People learn to dance and develop an automatic reaction through repetition. When they are familiar with the basic components (body flow, hand usage, turning direction, distance, etc.) of a new move it is time to provide them practice with the new move through repetition. It is very important to ensure this practice is error free. If the repetition is wrong they will learn incorrectly and their automatic reaction to the moves will be flawed. The amount of time required to "un-teach" incorrect learning is much longer than the original teach. Some estimates put the time at four times the original teach. This time will be increased even more if the dancers have become very familiar with the moves and have experienced "overlearning". Therefore, the best advise is "teach it right the first time" even if it feels like it is taking longer than needed. It will be time very well spent.

Learning by Reading

Learning by reading is an effective way to learn to 'know' something. Reading is usually more effective if accompanied with photographs, diagram, or figures.

There are some people, although not many, who can learn the skills required to square dance by simply studying written material and pictures. Even for those who do not have this unique ability, it is a very good idea to provide the students with written material including definitions, styling tips, and timing information. This material is even more helpful if photographs or drawings are included.. Even those unique people who can learn the definitions of the moves by reading, will still require a certain amount of actual practice to acquire the automatic reaction needed when dancing.

CONCLUSIONS

Teaching new dancers is very important and requires certain skills which can be studied, developed, and practiced. Callers must learn how to teach people to dance; for some callers this will be easy, for others it will be difficult. There are many different teaching styles, techniques, and methods; some will be effective and others will not. The talented teacher will develop the ability to apply the appropriate teaching techniques to each situation.

Even though application of these techniques by experienced instructors can not guarantee success, the combination of these elements and experience can help increase the probability of success. The question then is, "How does one acquire the experience needed to become an effective teacher?" The answer is not simple and will be different for each person. Effective methods to acquire experience include studying the information presented here, obtaining and studying additional information about how people learn, and developing a comprehensive understanding not only of what is to be taught but also how people learn. Finally, one of the best ways to acquire this critical skill is to study and practice under the watchful eye of an experienced and qualified caller coach.

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