

Introducing a Beginner to Contra Dancing

This article is an edited and expanded version of a response to a question on the "Boston Area Contra Community" (BACC) list on Yahoo Groups. The questioner asked "Given that you may only have 20 minutes to teach some contra basics, what figures do you teach first? What 'lesson plan' will give the most 'bang for the buck'?"

I believe that this subject is extremely important to any dance community. Because how we introduce beginners is their first impression of dancing and what we are like as a community. It has a direct effect on whether or not they will continue to dance the rest of the evening much less come back another time.

Guiding principles for my actions when interacting with beginners:

1. Beginners are generally in sensory overload their first night. They are being spun around, held, looked at, listening to new music and exercising aerobically.
2. Beginners are generally in information overload their first night. They are learning a new dance style and moves that are generally easy, but are receiving it almost all at once.
3. Beginners are having several social taboos broken by a new community's standards of behavior (personal space being invaded, prolonged eye contact, etc.). This can make them uncomfortable depending on their background.
4. The caller will be evaluating the skill level of the dancers and teaching figures as necessary.
5. Some moves are easily understood and can be taught "on the fly" through gentle guidance while dancing.

Everything that you can do to keep things simple and relaxed will make a dancer's first experience (and several after that) more enjoyable!!!

Before the dance:

With these principles in mind, when I introduce someone to contra dance, I teach three moves. I limit to three to keep them from being overloaded with information. This keeps the introduction short and relaxed. Sometimes you only have a few minutes before the dancing starts and it's important to be brief. These three are chosen because they both are not taught by the caller (generally) and are difficult to teach "on the fly" during the dance. They are listed below with a description of how I teach them.

Here is what I teach:

- A. A walking swing
- B. Do-si-do
- C. Courtesy turn (for both a right and left thru and ladies chain)

A. I teach a walking swing by first turning them by two hands. I ask them if they remember playing this game when they were children. This also lets me control the speed and amount of arm tension that they're feeling. When it feels right, I say "see how this feels? This is how a swing feels, but we hold each other in a different way. Remember this feeling." Then I either stop and get them into a ballroom position, or I pull them close in a smooth motion. If necessary, I remind them to walk forward with a smooth step. I have had a roughly 90% success rate with this technique. This means that 90% of them have a swing that is not awkward and perfectly sufficient to get them through the next few nights of dancing. If they keep up with

dancing, they can be shown a buzz step swing later.

At this point, I usually mention that if they want to keep from getting dizzy, most people find it helpful to look at some point on their partner. I mention that a lot of people enjoy looking into each other's eyes, but it's not necessary. See item 3 above.

B. I teach a do-si-do because there is no contact and people often find it confusing if they don't know what it is. I'll usually demonstrate with an experienced partner WITHOUT twirls. Then I have them do it. Once they're successful, I mention that they are going to see other people twirling and (with an experienced partner) demonstrate a do-si-do with mad spinning. I let them know that they don't have to copy this. And that as long as they end up in the place they started, facing the same direction, everything is good.

C. I have been experimenting with different ways to teach the courtesy turn. My latest technique is to break it down by getting them into promenade position with left hands joined in front and right hands next to the ladies hip. Then I have them wheel around in place with the gent backing up. Then I have them face another couple and do a right and left through. Pass the opposite by the right shoulder and wheel around ("scoop the ladies" by Lisa Greenleaf's terminology) to face them again. Repeat a couple of times. Then I show them the variation of that by doing a ladies chain.

Once again, I will use an experienced partner to show them what a twirling courtesy turn is. I explain that this is people showing off and not necessary. I let the women know that they can stop this by pulling their hand down. I usually add Lisa Greenleaf's addendum to this: And then smile at him to let him know that you're thankful for the suggestion and that you definitely don't want to twirl.

Once I'm done teaching the figures, I may mention about asking people to dance (everyone asks everyone) and reassure them that people will be friendly and helpful. That the caller and other dancers will teach anything else they need to know. I remind them to relax and have fun! Then I ask one of the women to dance. Throughout the evening, I'll try to find men and women who are good with beginners and ask them to dance with a particular new dancer.

During the Dance:

First, I offer a good example by listening to the caller while they're teaching the dance. Often, the caller will be teaching figures that my partner needs to know. Also, I'm not confusing them by making them choose between listening to the caller or myself. I'll only speak as necessary to clarify a move that the caller just prompted during the walkthrough.

When I'm dancing with a new dancer, I also try to reduce their overload by taking out the twirls and flourishes. This means not twirling during a do-si-do, courtesy turn, Rory o'More or Petronella figures. I swing them slowly and do not twirl them out. I make sure that when I'm done dancing with them, they are facing the correct direction with the correct hand free. I use hand gestures and pointing to make it clear what they are doing next. Words generally require too much mental processing and terms that are unfamiliar.

Most importantly, I SMILE!!! I praise them on doing well! Let them know that I'm having fun dancing with them! It lets them relax and enjoy themselves, too. They'll be more likely to come back because

they felt welcomed.

Parting thoughts:

One of the most important lessons that I have learned as a dancer is to tailor how I dance to each person I interact with. Some people give too much weight, some none at all. Some want to swing fast and twirl like mad, some get dizzy and don't want to swing at all. Everyone is at a different stage of learning how to dance and has different preferences for how they like to dance. The more you can adapt your dancing style to the needs of your partners and neighbors, the more people will enjoy dancing with you and seek you out. And the more fun you'll have! It just happens that it's especially important to adjust your dancing with beginners. The same is true of teaching dance. The above technique is only a guideline and you might have to adjust it to how quickly or slowly the person is learning or to that person's learning style. Some learn by doing, some by watching and some through being told. Tailor your teaching based on what works for the student, not your own preferences.

So relax, smile and ask a beginner to dance! Offer praise and welcome. I have made some great friends because I danced with them while they were still learning. Don't miss out on the fun!

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