

UNSTRAIGHTENING CONTRA: Community building through Gender-free dancing

Laura Gorrin & Yoyo Zhou

Contra dancing calls for distinct roles for men and for women, but people don't always fit so neatly into those two boxes. In this workshop we will talk about our experience making traditional contras more welcoming for everyone, as well as our experience with our gender-neutral dance, Circle Left. Making contra less gendered not only makes your dance more inviting to LGBT people and to young people, but it also provides exciting new opportunities for straight and experienced contra dancers.

Yoyo Zhou and Laura Gorrin are organizers of Circle Left, a gender neutral contra dance in Berkeley, CA. They have noticed that gender neutral dances, and LGBT inclusiveness in general, draw not only LGBT people to events, but also draw more young people. Here are some ways to make your dance more inclusive of people of all genders and sexualities.

OUTLINE: Unstraightening Contra (Laura Forrin & Yoyo Zhou)

1: Caller's Language and Teaching

- Say explicitly that anyone can do either role
 - This should happen throughout the night, not just in the beginner lesson.
- ladies/gents is preferable to men/women. Something non gendered, like band/barearm, is better.
 - Since ladies and gents are terms more removed from everyday vocabulary, they feel more like roles to play than like descriptions of people's identities.
- Accept that dancers' gender need not match their dance gender (e.g. when taking hands four).
- Address calls to everyone, not just to the leads.
 - e.g. "swing your partner," not "swing the lady."
- Consider teaching beginners both roles.

2: Things Dancers Can Do

- Respect one another.
- No separate same gender swings.
- Avoid comments that imply that dancers are in the wrong place. Don't "correct" other couples in line.
- Dance with who's coming at you, regardless of the gender you expect.
 - If your neighbors are in the wrong place, they can fix it on the swing.
- Try the other role.
- Ask people of your same gender to dance.
- Ask each new partner for their preferred dance role.

3: Things Circle Left Dance Organizers Do

- Gender free calling (band/barearm)
- Inclusion statement on publicity
- Gender neutral bathrooms
- Have a skirt table, where people can borrow or buy skirts
 - Name it: say explicitly that people of all genders wear skirts to contra
- Don't gender the dancers.
 - Callers should avoid pronouns when talking about individual people they don't know.

- Cross advertise with other queer spaces.

ATTENDEE NOTES:

Circle Left (the contra dance they run) uses arm bands to designate lead/follower roles. They don't really like that designation, but haven't come up with something better yet. One problem with the designation is that the words "Bands" and "Bare" sound too much alike. Better not to have any visual marker at all. One suggestion from a previous dance was "Stars" and "Moons".

Young people (not just gays) prefer gender neutrality, less binding roles. It opens up opportunities for things like swapping genders on and off during a dance.

Instead of saying "her" say "the person in the orange shirt."

Most non-traditional dancers do not use the non-traditional swings, like the sometimes used lady-with-lady swing. It is just too awkward to figure out what everyone would do fast enough.

Generally the lead's hands are on the bottom, and the follower's hands are on the top.

Callers be careful not to "fix" a couple that is dancing in non-traditional roles.

Consider that "Gypsy" is an ethnic slur.

Just like any dancer, don't pull them too close, don't touch parts of their body that they may not appreciate, or say things that might offend.

If your dance is not at the point where, for instance, men easily dance with other men; maybe hold off reaching out to the gay community. Another thing gays may appreciate is gender-neutral bathrooms. In a multi-stall bathroom, that would mean men would be washing hands with women. Make sure your audience is ready for this before doing it, because people may be challenged, offended or even assaulted in this situation.

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Spectrum:

anyone can dance with anyone in any role

strange looks if dance common sex, some role swapping

no dancing with same sex and no role swapping

arm bands is "lead"

tie means "unusual" for woman to play gent role

Luke Danforth from VT: "now with that person you do-si-do'ed, ask that person if they'd like to dance the gent or lady role".

Try to not refer to someone by a gendered pronoun (he/she). I could take "this person's" hand, instead of "his" or "her". Watch "the person in the orange shirt" do this move.

The comment "You switched" indicates that I "should not be in this role".

Thanks makes me feel uncomfortable, can you change your behavior?

Notes taken by Lucy Frey