

Youth Dance Weekend 2008

Discussions focused on getting and keeping new dancers

Original Post: <https://youthdanceweekend.org/resources/bread-butter/>
(Reposted on the CDSS website with permission)

FROM THE YDW ORGANIZERS:

During Youth Dance Weekend 2008 we had a great discussion about a wide range of issues related to youth involvement and leadership in dance and music. We brainstormed a long list of questions together, wrote them up on large sheets of paper all around the room, and then spent a while walking around and writing down our individual ideas and suggestions.

The exercise was meant to start discussion about these various topics. There are a lot of great ideas here, and not everyone agrees about every answer. Some of the topics overlap in interesting ways. We hope you'll take what you can from this brainstorm, try it out in your community, and keep talking with others about what works. You can leave comments at the bottom of each topic page, where it says continue the conversation...Enjoy!

HOW TO INVIGORATE A DYING DANCE...

- Bring in new dancers. Invite friends.
- Tap into young crowd via things like Facebook. Invite (personally) key people from other dance communities who will bring their friends
- The key is the critical mass.
- Hold big event (good caller and band around a holiday/theme) to re-spark interest.

HOW TO ATTRACT YOUNGER DANCERS

- If you have children or young friends have them bring a group of their peers to a dance. It is much easier to entice them with others of their age there.
- Cookies/Ice Cream/Pizza!
- We gave free admission to freshmen who arrived in the first 1/2 hour of the dance.
- Don't compare to square dancing!
- Don't disparage contra or other dance forms
- Pop really hot contra music in the stereo when you have non-dancer friends over. Then invite them to the dance.
- Have special events and invite your friends.
- Student rates
- Not just students! Recent grads are paying off loans!
- Say contra dance party on the flyer
- Don't answer when asked "what is it?"
- be vague
- Advertise
- Tell people they'll get a fun workout to music
- Tell them that even people who don't like any other kinds of dancing like contra – it worked for me!
- Make it a fundraiser for a cause i.e. square dance for mountaintop removal
- It's a dance designed for white guys who "can't dance"
- Be family friendly – it's ok to have little kids at dances

HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN CONTRA? WHAT IS CONTRA DANCING?

- I have described it as “American folk dancing; similar to square dancing, but in long lines of couples, so you dance with more people. Also, simple to learn and easy to have fun!”
- I’ve described it as a human puzzle to be unraveled to music. There is a set pattern to be followed and each time it finishes the puzzle is started again.
- Think of square dancing from your youth and replace all the hokey with folksy. A tilt-a-whirl powered by smiling flirtatious humans.
- Use terms that whoever you are talking to can relate to. Contra can fall into many categories: folk, fiddle, swingy, rave even. Use familiar terms!
- Don’t. instead, let your enthusiasm be the draw – have a special event, and invite them.
- If a computer is handy good clips can be found on YouTube and similar sites.
- Some have had success with: “it taps into the same feelings as Whirling Dervishes get.” Or “it’s a way to turn off your brain without drugs or alcohol.”
- Or “only place where a new person is thrust into your arms every thirty seconds.”
- Talk as much about the great community, it’s as important as the dancing style
- “live music, dancing and so much fun! You have to come try it!”
- like a square dance on amphetamines
- flirting set to music
- one (or two?) steps closer to “real dancing” than DDR (for nerdy non-dancing types)

HOW TO GET DANCERS OF OTHER STYLES INTO CONTRA?

- Half night one sort of dance, half night contra
- Tell them you’ll go to their dance if they come to yours (trade)
- someone else underlined “to yours” and wrote “loaded!”
- Demos at breaks
- Advertise (mutual)
- It’s helpful when callers can mix in a square or English dance
- Hartford Community Dance has one night a year (I think) where they have contra, swing, Cajun/zydeco, other dances the same night
- Maybe describe contra in terms of other dances? — it’s a little like swing
- OR JUST BRING THEM!
- Lots of contra bands have distinct styles. So invite a dancer who has not gone to a
- contra to a dance that has a style that they would like. For instance take a swing dancer to a “swingy” contra
- Play some contra music at the end of the dance. (get them excited about music first – most of the time, it’s music that makes you want to dance!)

HOW TO INCLUDE NEWER DANCERS AS A DANCER/CALLER?

- Ask one to dance
- But how many people actually do this, though they know it’s a good thing (for somebody else) to do?
- Exactly my point
- Have a guest-caller program – one dance a night
- Dance in other sets (other than “experienced” set)
- NAME TAGS ALL the time every time!
- Caller should remind dancers to dance with people they don’t know
- Caller should encourage dancers to switch line every dance (to not create a separate center set)

- Callers can personally ask experienced dancers to seek out new people.
- Newer dancers are less intimidated by doing a “circle” or non-partner dance to get their feet wet
- Experienced dancers aren’t necessarily going to be willing to dance with new folks ALL the time – for many of us, we come to the dance for another kind of experience. But creating a culture of expectation where experienced dancers dance with two beginners per night would make a big difference.
- Caller could designate one dance per night where everyone is asked to dance with someone they don’t know?
- Would people DO this?
- Yes, ask new dancers, then introduce them to your friends or point them out and ask your friends to dance with them
- Chris Ricciotti gives AMAZING workshops on how advanced dancers can be “dance angels” to beginning dancers. This includes the line dancing blindfolded to get the experience of being a new dancer all over, as well as leading blindfolded dancers GENTLY.
- Try to not go overboard with booking ahead
- I think this question, and other similar ones, is actually two. 1. How do you make it a great experience for the newer dancers and 2. How do you make it a great experience for experienced dancers? These may be irreconcilable, especially if the experienced dancers are only dancing for that “amazing dance high” that we get. They are only reconcilable if experienced dancers see, and ACT ON the value of a real dance community, for its own sake. And not just for the sake of high-energy, amazing dancing.
- [written on the perpetual beginners sheet and then transferred here] In Atlanta there once was a dance “mama” – a volunteer job where one person who meets the beginners at the lesson before – and then throughout the dance would supervise and help move the beginners in the right direction and give tips

HOW TO DEAL WITH LESS EXPERIENCED DANCERS COMING IN AFTER WORKSHOP?

- Ask one to dance.
- yes!
- Talk up (create a culture of) experienced dancers pointedly dancing with beginners
- Glen echo’s buddy system
- Experienced dancers should dance with at least one new dancer each night
- Give discount if arrive in first half hour
- Greenfield sometimes does “free if you come for a beginner’s workshop thing” and it seems to work well.
- Commit at least two of your dances every time you go dancing to including new folks
- Go easy on them and teach — a first-time dancer can feel comfortable (and hooked!) after one successful dance.
- For the love of God, DON’T be bossy or superior. They’ll never come back.
- If you see someone struggling, talk to them after the set and see if they have questions.
- If someone really doesn’t want to do lots of extra twirls, don’t force them to!
- If you want to refuse an extra offered twirl, smile!
- Dance angels?
- Extra instruction during break!

WHERE TO GET THE WORD OUT...

- facebook
- campus newspapers
- local coffeeshops or community bulletin boards