

Scandinavian Dancers of Vancouver BC TIPS FOR TEACHERS MINI-WORKSHOP

presented by Deborah Jones
Scandinavian Community Centre
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Our Executive would like to (a) work to make our dance instruction as effective as possible and (b) encourage more members to volunteer to teach dances, so that we have a greater pool of skills, ideas and energies to draw from. The purpose of this mini-workshop is to offer some thoughts and spark further discussion about what makes for good teaching.

1. Know the dance you're teaching

This is not always easy, as with workshop dances that are new to us all. But do be aware that the club has an excellent video collection (ask Bob Redlich for the catalogue), a master binder of dance descriptions (ask Deborah Jones), as well as several members' binders of dance descriptions. These materials can be a great help to teachers, especially for the more complex dances.

2. Keep your "students" involved

Again, not always easy, especially in a setting like the Centre, which is so ideal for encouraging socializing, chitchat over refreshments, etc. But here are some useful tactics:

2.1 Write the dance name on the board

Make sure everyone knows what you're teaching and what its "larger significance" is, by

(a) writing the dance name(s) and place(s) of origin on the board before you start to teach, and

(b) including a theme if appropriate (eg "Springdances Camp Dances", "Norwegian Favourites", "Hambo Variations" or whatever).

2.2 Get everyone's attention

Ask everyone into a circle (singles or couples) around you, before you announce what you're going to teach (pointing to information on board for reinforcement). Then get into the actual teaching. Don't begin announcing or teaching until you've got everyone's attention.

2.3 Re-form the circle

If you're teaching a couple dance, frequently pause and ask dancers to re-form their circle. This allows you to do 4 things:

- (a) get their attention again after what can sometimes be a rather chaotic "trial run" at a dance;
- (b) re-space the couples, for easier dancing on the next trial run;
- (c) ask any extra dancers of one sex or the other to move into the circle so they'll get a chance to dance; and
- (d) move all gents or all ladies forward one partner, so that less experienced dancers have the chance to dance with more experienced ones.

2.4 Watch the dancers

Throughout your teaching, take time to *really watch* how each dancer is doing. Notice the types of problems people are having, and make some general comments to everyone (trying not to mention names, unless to praise!). You can practice for this by watching dancers during social dancing, and trying to analyze the types of problems they encounter and why.

2.5 Keep your focus on the group

If you notice individuals or couples who are really struggling, refrain from devoting your full attention to them (unless you're teaching as a couple, and your other half can do without you for awhile). Match them up with strong dancers and/or tell them privately that you'll be available to offer more personal instruction outside of class time. If possible, generalize what the problem is and state it to the whole class. For example, "Remember to use polska hold and to keep your upper body framework strong; it'll make the couple-turn easier."

2.6 Address responses to everyone

If a "student" asks you a question or makes a comment, be sure that all dancers have heard that question or comment (repeat it louder yourself, if necessary). Move toward the centre of the room and direct your response to everyone, not just to the person who addressed you; avoid "one-on-one" exchanges.

3. Be aware of different learning styles

People use different tactics to learn things: ***watching, verbalizing, analyzing, doing***. Some dancers will be using all these tactics simultaneously, and will learn easily, while others may rely very strongly on one particular tactic or another. Therefore, it's important to mix your teaching tactics. Here's a good sequence, which can be used for a whole dance (if it's simple), or for each portion of a dance (if it's complex and you need to break it down into component parts).

3.1 Listen, then demonstrate

Begin your teaching by listening to the music for a bit and then demonstrating (or showing a video of) the whole dance. This is not always possible with set dances and mixers, but it's the ideal. Dancers who learn easily by **watching** will absorb a lot right away.

3.2 Add voice cues

Next, *while still demonstrating* (or still watching a video), add in some voice cues (see also section 4 below). Prepare these voice cues before you teach, so they're automatic to you, and try to say them rhythmically, in time with the music. This **verbalizing** will be very helpful to some dancers, and allow them to see patterns which they hadn't seen before you added the voice cues.

For a simple dance, your voice cues should describe footwork and/or direction of movement (eg "**step-together-step** and **step-together-step** and **back-two-three-four**").

For a complex dance, the voice cues accompanying your initial demonstration should describe the overall structure rather than the actual footwork. (eg "*First we do the open promenade; now we're doing the bakmes turn; here's the closed promenade; and finally, the pols turn.*") This **analyzing** of the overall pattern of the dance will help lots of people see the big picture. Later, you can get down to voice cues for the footwork of each component part of the dance.

3.3 Get dancers involved

Next, get the dancers involved right away in **doing** the dance, or a portion of it, if it's complex. People who learn best by doing need to get dances into their "muscle memory", and the only way for them to do this is to *dance*. Avoid talking for long stretches, but instead describe just one or two elements or refinements of your dance at a time, followed immediately by having everyone try to **do** them.

3.4 Use lots of repetition

Everyone learns better through many repeated tries, with little breaks in between. So keep repeating the sequence of **demonstrate / verbalize-analyze / do**, for either the whole dance or portions of the dance. Remember to watch the dancers' efforts, then give them your feedback as a little break between repetitions, then do a partner change if desired, then do the dance again.

As a general rule, do the most repetitions of the hardest parts of dances, focusing just on those parts, until dancers can do them with as much confidence as they do the easy parts. Then put it all together.

3.5 Remember the transitions

No matter what a person's learning style, the hardest part of a dance is often going to be the **transitions** from one part to another. So remember to apply the *demonstrate / verbalize-analyze / do / repeat* sequence to transitions as well as to the "meat" of the dance.

3.6 Wrong way, right way

This is a cautionary note about your feedback to dancers: If you decide to demonstrate what dancers are doing **wrong**, make absolutely certain that everyone knows you're demonstrating the **wrong** way, and follow this immediately by showing the **right** way. If you don't do this, dancers whose learning style is based heavily on watching and imitating may well get the wrong message.

4. Use your voice effectively

4.1 Speak up

Speak up!! But if noise levels are escalating, and you have lots of "presence", you may be successful with standing commandingly silent for a few moments, and then speaking softly.

4.2 Get everyone started at the same time

When you're getting the dancers to try a dance or sequence, whether it's with or without music, keep everyone together by using a voice cue such as:

"Ready, **and** ..." or
"Weight on your inside foot, **and** ..." etc

Make the word "*and*" loud, clear, and in time with the music. Your "*and*" is the vocal equivalent of what musicians call the "pickup"--the note just before the first beat of a measure or phrase of music. Try to make your voice tell the dancers what the tempo will be. You can practice this to familiar recordings of schottis, hambo, or other dances that you know very well.

4.3 Use standard voice cues, and keep it rhythmic

For your voice cues, try to use the standard terminology found in written dance descriptions and on videos. But don't hesitate to invent your own cues, such as "**twizzle**" or "**hiccup**" or whatever, if you can't find a short voice cue that fits the dance you're cueing.

Often, you'll have a choice between a voice cue which describes a step (eg waltz) and one which describes a direction (eg forward or back). Will it be "**Waltz-two-three-four-five-six**"? Or "**Forward-two-three-back-two-three**"? Try both!! Dancers respond differently to different words, so a couple of different versions of your cues can be a good thing.

Here are some useful terms. There are many more which you can learn by reading dance descriptions or watching dance videos.

step (also: **walk**) - moving forward, sideways or backwards by changing weight from one foot to the other. At least one foot is on the floor at all times.

hop - standing on one foot, propel yourself up in the air, and return to earth on the same foot

lift - a lazy hop; your heel leaves the ground, but the sole of your shoe does not

leap - like a hop, except you return to earth on the *other* foot. As in a hop, there's a moment when you're up in the air, with neither foot touching the floor.

run - usually, a series of little leaps; but sometimes a run can be low and smooth, with at least one foot on the floor at all times.

both (also: **together**, or sometimes **touch**) - often in Scandi dancing, this looks like weight is on both feet--whether spread apart or close together--but often the weight is mostly on one foot or the other, or is being transferred from one foot to the other. Be prepared, when using the word *both*, to explain where dancers should put their weight.

polska hold, ballroom hold, shoulder-waist hold, etc.

line of dance (also: **line of direction, LOD**) - usually means counter clockwise

reverse line of dance - the other way ... usually clockwise

5. Listen to the music

Last but not least, it really helps if you have the feel of the music "in your bones", so listen, listen, listen! That elusive polska beat will become clear if you listen long enough--especially if you try to hum along with the tune.

The beat is often clearest at the beginnings and endings of musical phrases, so try to listen for those places in the music. When there's live music, watch where musicians tap their feet (often, beats 1 and 3 of polskas), and listen for the "thump" of the beat played by the bass, guitar, pump organ or accordion.

Finally, don't hesitate to ask a musician for any insights they might have into the character of a tune--and of the dance or dances that fit nicely with it. Our teaching is usually done to recorded music, but you might want to round up a live musician or musicians once in awhile for your teaching sessions, if you think it will help get a dance's beat and character across to the dancers.



Thinking of teaching? Go ahead, give it a try! Your own dancing will improve, and everyone will enjoy and benefit from your fresh new face and approach. 