

Master Teacher Class for Texas Camp 2023

This is my best attempt to capture what was shared during this session for Teachers of Folk Dance – both thoughts I shared and, as much as I was able to remember, ideas and suggestions from the participants. My apologies if I did not capture your good thoughts. Many great ideas were shared by a wealth of experienced dance Teachers. Thanks to all who attended and participated.

My notes here are distilled from facilitator notes for active workshops given in the past. If you were present at Texas Camp, these should all make sense to you. If you were not able to attend, these may seem ‘incomplete’. As I tend to think in ‘bullet points’, feel free to contact me for clarification.

Considerations for Teachers of Folk Dance

First: Why do you dance?

Like to move Love the music Social Feels good
Challenging Love it when it’s right! FUN!!!

All the answers boil down to... it’s FUN! Fun with my friends, fun to be challenged, etc. Never forget why your audience is there! Be sure you incorporate these ‘Whys’ into your teaching! If it’s not FUN for them, they won’t come back!

And if you’re not having fun, it won’t be fun for them!

Second: You need to be aware that there are 3 separate skills that are equally important:

- Learning a dance - This is taking outside information and absorbing it into yourself. (Out to In)
- Executing or doing/dancing – This is showing what you learned.
- **Teaching a dance** - This is the act of taking what is internal (learning and ability) and being able to communicate it to the outside world. (In to Out)

These are three **Separate and distinct skills**.

Just because you ‘know’ how to do something does not mean you can teach it!

Sometimes the best people at doing a task have been doing it so long that they have no idea what it is they actually do; and cannot communicate all that they are doing.

Also, just because someone is slower than most to learn something does NOT mean that their execution will be less perfect! Speed of learning does not equal quality of dance – or ability to teach! Be patient! Repetition helps!

This class is NOT about how to learn better or how to be a better dancer (although learning to teach can enhance both sometimes.) This information is an attempt to help you be the best TEACHER of dance that you can be.

Third: In order to be a good teacher, you need to understand how people learn.

We all have preferred learning styles – **we all learn differently.**

Many PhD's have been earned and books written on Learning Theory. What you need to know is that everyone learns the same – and differently.

What is different: is how we *prefer* to take in information and how we process that information.

For instance: If I say, 'Step left, then right at 45 degrees clockwise, left to turn 120' that means absolutely NOTHING to 98% of people. 😊 But for 2%, it's PERFECT!

In every group of people, some want the counts; others, the rhythm; others need all the Rights & Lefts; others need the relationship to partner; some need how it FEELS; etc.

And each of us teachers has a preference; which means it is most natural for us to teach in the manner that we like to learn. But if we do, we're leaving out a lot of people.

If you have one way of explaining something, then many people will struggle to understand. If you have had the experience or have heard others say, "I can't learn from so-and-so teacher", it's because they are not teaching to YOUR preferred way of taking in information.

So: **The more DIFFERENT ways we can explain each thing**, the better!

GOAL1:

Find as many different ways to explain each figure/transition/etc. as you can.

(Your odds of 'getting through' to each person is greater the more different ways you can explain each thing. Then choose your verbal cues carefully!)

How many ways can you explain a Yemenite step?

QQS, L R L, Side and cross, Basketball 'fake', changed my mind, etc.

Then, once they have a pattern down, add the term 'yemenite' to title the series of steps – increasing their dance vocabulary as well as their dance ability.

How many ways can you explain the transition to then 3step turn that follows? ...etc.

Do this exercise with EVERY step pattern and transition in the dance. (Yes it's work.)

And no, it's not confusing, if you tee it up as "you can think of it as ... or as" I think of it as.... It's all the same, so use the words that work for you/learner." That way, everyone present has an equal chance of learning.

What is the same in all our learning styles is:

We all need to See it done; Hear it explained; and DO it!

- Sight is a strong sense and comprises 30% of our understanding. Therefore you want to accurately perform the dance – so they 'see it in its 'correct form'
- Some of us are auditory and really need to hear the dance moves described. For most, hearing constitutes only 10% of understanding – so choose words carefully! Use words for impact, consistency, and FUN! (And saying it while showing it is doubly effective!)
- ALL of us need to DO the dance. Doing it yourself is 60% of understanding. This means, for teachers – get them doing it quickly. But since they will remember what they do, as much as possible, have them practice correctly. **MUSCLE MEMORY (& sense of smell) works and lasts longest! So GET THEM MOVING!** (But make sure they practice correctly. Habits are hard to break!)

They came to dance, not hear a lecture - or admire how well *you* dance!

Anxiety & stress impede learning!

People learn best when they are relaxed – PLAYFUL! But learning a new skill is stressful; learning a new skill in public causes performance anxiety.

So as much as you can, limit the stress of participants. Don't call them out in front of the group if they are doing something wrong. Mistakes are okay and necessary for learning!

Do something wrong and Laugh at yourself! Demonstrate that it's okay to make mistakes.

Have them stretch and relax their muscles. Learners use much more effort than is necessary to do the dance. Flap the arms. Shrug the shoulders...

GOAL2: Get them moving, keep them relaxed, and have some fun!

To accomplish Goal 1 & 2, it takes forethought and planning. It doesn't happen 'naturally'.

How to **PREPARE TO TEACH:**

Yes, we're all volunteers with limited time to commit... but remember the Teachers' influence? Influence comes with responsibility. Teachers have the responsibility to prepare adequately.

None of us enjoy learning from an ill-prepared teacher. It's never fun for the audience to watch someone struggle in public – it makes us all feel queasy!

So don't do that to YOUR class! **PREPARE!**

Joan's Rule of thumb: spend 3x the length of time you have to teach in active preparation.

For instance, if you will be teaching for 30 minutes, you should allow AT LEAST an hour and a half of prep time.

"But I already know the dance!", you say. What will I do for that time???

So the following are some notes on how to **Prepare to Teach**.

1. What to teach:

Select a dance that **you do accurately** (you do not have to be THE expert but you must be able to demo it accurately.) KNOW it. Don't try to teach a dance that you are still figuring out. Wait until you really know it comfortably. Do your homework – internet, YouTube, dance notes AND errata...)

- a. Make sure the dance is appropriate for the SKILL LEVEL of the class! ?
If your target audience is beginning level, a 4 figure with multiple directional turns and styling nuisances will be nothing but FRUSTRATING for them – regardless of how well you teach!

Note: You can (and I do) teach more advanced dances to beginners. You just need to have adequate time and patience – lots of repetitions. Tell them AFTER they master it that it's not a beginner dance -never before or during!

- b. Select music that has a prominent beat – is easy to hear/well phrased. Come early and listen to the choices (if any) – or contact your programmer...
c. Determine your GOAL for teaching.

Will 1st timers MASTER this dance?

Will advanced dancers Master this dance?

Can beginners successfully dance it (get around/get the feel)?

Be realistic – not everyone will MASTER everything (and most of them don't even care if they do!) Remember why they are here!

2. De-construct your dance.

- a. What are the essential elements? Direction of travel, symmetric, moves a lot, creeps along, Circle, line, partner, set dance, no hands. One figure that repeats; progressive variations, called, choreographed to music, etc.
b. What are the step patterns/footwork that are needed? Find at least 3 different ways to explain each of them!
c. What is the feel/character/flavor of the dance? Smooth, bouncy, joyous, internal, 2 move as 1... Find at least 3...
d. Transitions, transitions, and transitions! Take them apart, what count does it start on, what foot goes where, what direction are you facing, what do you do with your arms, etc. Find at least 3... Note: a 'step' is a series of steps, like a Yeminite or a pas de basque. A transition is how you get from the Yeminite into the pas de basque. Some are easy...some require weight change or directional changes. These can make or break learning a dance!

3. Plan your teaching approach.
 - a. Break it into sections.
 - b. Decide on the order that you will teach the sections. (SOMETIMES it works best to teach the difficult figure first...)
 - c. Think about how much time you have to teach this – and how much time you can spend on each section.
 - d. Set your Goal for each section. Competence, mastery, happiness? You may need to adjust your goals based on the time you have and the level of the class participants. Be realistic. Remember – you want them to FEEL SUCCESS!
 - e. Plan your repetitions. Plan your practice sessions/chunks of the dance. Practice CROSSING the transitions between figures.

4. Plan how you will incorporate general dance knowledge and group mores.
 - a. Use Words specifically – to help them create a dance vocabulary that they can use for all learning:

3 step turn, grapevine, reda, hop step step, 7's & 3's, stamp, stomp ker-plop (it's okay to make up words!)
 - b. Teach dance etiquette and group rules:

come to the dance clean; invest in good shoes; help clean up at the end of the dance; right hand up/left hand down; join the dance in the center of the line; introduce yourself to new people; show appreciation for live music...
 - c. Weave these into your teaching rather than calling them out. Select a few and plan how/where you will share a tip or two. They will appreciate it!!!

ONLY NOW you are ready to **PRACTICE TEACHING!**

No one plays Othello without rehearsals! Teaching is a lot like theatrics – you cannot rehearse too much! Rehearsals get the 'bugs' out, allows you to discover what you are not prepared for, and allows the 'stage directions' to be shared with all.

Teach first by thinking it through. Do it in your head – Do it alone in your room. Use the music. Revise, repeat...

Make NOTES of your thoughts and ideas. (They are fleeting! Capture them!)

You have mentally practiced teaching your dance – and have made notes. Now it's time to PRACTICE teaching by doing. (Remember – doing cements the learning!)

- Consider what questions various participants will have. Answer them in your teaching – before they are asked.
- Consider what steps/transitions/etc. will be most challenging – and make these as clear and clean as possible.
- Consider what you are doing when you actually dance – but are not explaining – and stop and figure out how to explain and show what that is.

The more organized you are with your Preparations, the faster and easier the teaching goes.

Your GOAL for all this preparation and practice is to be SO PREPARED that you can:

- Execute your teaching plan flawlessly

AND

- Observe and respond to the needs of the participants. (Hint: Take a participant aside and ask them in advance to help you do this.) See 'During your actual teaching' below.

AND

- Make the experience FUN and successful. Reduce anxiety (yours and theirs), use humor...

AND

- Celebrate their success (at whatever level is right for them.)

READY. SET. TEACH!!!!

During your actual Teaching:

Observe the dancers. Look at their faces as well as their feet. Are they having fun???

Prepare to give feedback! Keep it positive! Humor can work! "Most of you are really close!"

Kindness REALLY does matter!!!!

Check yourself for signs of tension, frustration, etc. Get rid of these immediately!

(Note: if they are struggling, it's YOUR fault! You were unclear or not teaching to their learning style. Try again. Be patient with yourself, too! We're ALL learning!)

After your teaching:

Make notes on what you did WELL (Celebrate these!) and
What could be improved (make notes for next time.).

What worked – and what didn't.

Were some parts easier for them than you expected? – or did they had more difficulty than anticipated...

Ask for feedback – *specifics* – from an experienced teacher. Did I use any good words?
What part was confusing? Etc. LISTEN without comment.

WHAT will you do differently next time? What learnings are universal – and which specific to this dance?

And if you can do all this, you are on your way to being a master
teacher! And practice helps!

Some additional tips that were shared in class:

If the live music band is planning on playing a dance tune and the dance is not well know to the group, teach the dance to recorded music prior to the live music (the prior week – or earlier in the evening.) That way both the band and dancers are happy.

Briefly share stories about the dance. Some dances have specific histories, cultural significance, etc.. Song words may help dancers understand the 'mood' of the dance. But be careful to stay away from politics and agendas! And brevity is key. If it's a longer story, tease them with only a part of the story– and offer to share the rest with interested folks later. OR share your dance-specific stories in your newsletter or Folk Dance publication!

Be sure to share your source for the dance – who taught it to you; who introduced the dance originally, when was it introduced, etc. But keep it brief. Some of us knew the introducers personally and have a very personal connection...but to new dancers, these are just names.

If you don't feel that you are the best example of a style or step, it's great to point out others present that are good examples. It's a great way to recognize someone who has mastered a style and share the spotlight. It also tells newcomers that it's okay to not be 'perfect'.

Learn techniques to control/take charge of a room. Talk to your local school teacher for tips and techniques. How do you get their attention to begin teaching? How do you handle it if some are disruptive to the teaching? These are very helpful items to add to your teacher arsenal.

Advice for new teachers: Exude Confidence! (even if you have little.) A confident teacher puts the learners at ease, reducing their stress. Pretend...and it will be.

In Closing, please remember – We're all volunteers. We're all lifetime learners.

- **ALWAYS RESPECT THE TEACHER!** (whether they are new or tenured.)
They've worked hard to prepare. They're doing their best.

- The TEACHER is ALWAYS RIGHT (even if they are wrong.)
 - Only give feedback (during or after teaching) **if asked**.
 - If you want to help the teacher during the teaching, ask questions of the teacher for your own clarity, AND so that their answer will help the others.
 - **Never correct, confront, or 'side-teach'** (take someone aside and teach). All these undermine the credibility of the teacher. You wouldn't want someone to do it to you...so DON'T DO IT!
 - Our newer teachers bring a wealth of knowledge and skills. But they will never know or have experienced what we, the older dancers, know. And that's OKAY. Each generation brings new and different things. This is the way of nature. Stop 'expecting' them to know what we know. Learn from them.

We're ALL learning! **Kindness matters!**

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Up to now, the topic has been line, circle, or free dances. Everything discussed so far also applies to Couple or Partner dances, and Set dances. But Couple and Set dances present special problems! Here are a few tips for these.

Couple dances

- What partnering skills are needed? What is the Relationship of partners, what holds are used, what are the leads needed to communicate the changes, etc. Find at least 3 different ways to explain each of them!
- Frame is ALL! What does the hula-hoop look like in this dance? Round, oblong, etc?
- What is the relationship of each partners feet to the others? Step around? Step toward? Etc.
- To really understand a partner dance, you must dance with many people. Be sure you rotate partners as you practice. A good partner will let you know how it FEELS when it is right.
- For all Turning dances – your shoes matter! Advise as needed.
- It's best to know both roles of a dance – and then Teach from the leader's position – or practice TEACHING w/partner!

You are best served to have a partner who can not only execute the dance – but understands how you plan to teach it. *(If one teaches, and the other corrects the teacher, the discomfort is palpable to the audience! Don't go there.)*

- 1 Talk with your partner and decide how you will teach together. Either:
 - One will teach all, (the teacher must know BOTH parts) and the other just helps with dance demo. or
 - One is the lead teacher; the other is support – where all suggestions pass through the teacher. Or
 - We co-teach; we'll each take sections/steps/parts to teach. 50/50Any of these can and will work – but ONLY if you talk about it beforehand – and practice how it will go together.

2. Practice teaching according to your plan – which sections will one teach, and in which order.

Practice teaching one section at a time. Be open to feedback and suggestions from your partner. Talk about what you're doing and why.

Beware: Teaching together is like tandem canoeing...it has destroyed relationships!

Set dances

- Set dances take a long time to teach, and a short time to dance. Plan accordingly.
- They are easy for less than ½ the population (those that think schematically.)

Some aids that *might* help the general population are:

- Drawings – floor or wall
- Figure descriptors (figure of 8, cloverleaf pattern)

For non-spatial thinkers:

- relationships – visit all neighbors; hands across; you only dance with the Follows; always look across the set; etc.
- directions – always turn right!
- take hands first – then imagine the hands if hands-free
- same from here – repetition of chunks (from another position)

Set dances are very rewarding - but teachers need to have lots of patience handy!

Remember: Never underestimate the **influence that the Teacher has** on the comfort, happiness, and inclusion (culture) of the room. You are part of the chain of history for Folk Dance in the USA. Do your best. Prepare. And remember:

If you are having fun – they will too!

Now, Go Forth and TEACH!!!! With JOY!!!