

# *Teaching*

by Tim Marriner

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Good teaching is vitally important for square dancing to perpetuate. New dancers are the lifeblood of the activity. The transfusion of energy and excitement from new dancers is what keeps clubs and areas fresh and thriving. The new dancer is also one of the main arteries tapping the non-dancing public. Quite possibly, your next new dancer group will come from the contacts you have made today. Win this client over, and you can network into new areas that might not have been approached or spoiled by anyone else. Much like a multi-level marketing plan, the new dancer becomes the sales force that recruits new clients. If done properly, your market base will grow!

You must believe in the product and present it in a fresh and exciting manner in order to sell it to someone. High-energy smiles and fun attract people, being able to entertain keeps them attending. Teach with confidence. Let the dancers win. Let the social fellowship kindle new spirit spreading energy to recruit others.

Try this, on paper list all the perceived obstacles that the activity has today no matter how trivial. Don't debate any of them; just list as many as you can. Then, cross out all of the items that would no longer be an issue if our new dancer numbers were ten fold of today. You will be surprised at how many of these issues go away if our new dancer base were increased. Yet, we continue to make our entry program the tallest hurdle for the general public to get involved. We continue to add to the complexity of the dance ensuring that it will take over a year for a new dancer to get proficient and up to speed with the club. This issue is not new. In fact, leaders who had vision for the future discussed it as early as 1960. We have to make the best of the situation that we are in today. Our leaders need to be the best teachers possible in order to retain new dancers. Selling the fun and fellowship of the activity is easy. Teaching the dancers today's choreography, providing them with success can be difficult and should not be taken lightly. We all need to do our part to lower this hurdle in order to retain our present and future dancers, preserving this beautiful folk art.

## **How Do People Learn?**

1. Visually - by observation
2. Audibly - by listening
3. Tactically - by experience
4. Theoretically – by reading

The teacher must adapt to all learning abilities to provide the opportunity for everyone to understand the material. Also remember, not everyone learns at the same rate of speed. Entire groups will sometimes learn in intervals reaching several plateaus during the entire process. There is a big difference in learning speed and teaching speed.

When people have learned something they are able to apply that knowledge towards learning something new. This process is often referred to as **transference**. Positive transference is why it is easier to teach Weave the Ring to dancers who already have learned how to do a Right and Left Grand. Negative transference is why dancers confuse Two Ladies Chain and Dixie Style To An Ocean Wave. The action of these two calls seems similar to a new dancer. A caller needs to know when and where these exist to assist the new dancer.

It is said that people learn from their mistakes. This is not always true when it comes to learning square dancing. It is important for the new dancer to have a successful walk through of a call. A mistake during a walk through can impede the learning process and engrave an inaccurate habit pattern making the move more difficult to execute and harder to correct later on.

It is said a picture is worth a thousand words. Get on the floor and demonstrate the calls. Show them the proper styling and helpful counter dancing techniques. Utilize terms the dancer already know when describing an action. Sometimes simple English can best describe an action. Then, walk the dancers through the move so they may experience the action. Dancers learn by repetition so let them dance the call several times with different dancers. Be aware, the dancers are learning a call not a route. You must change the lead and follow up calls so they don't get into bad habits that will be hard to break later. "We always circle to a line after we lead right." You can also change the teaching perspective by working the dancers in big circles, two-couples, and contra lines.

Square dancing is really a new language for new dancers. They hear the word and translate its meaning to an action. Whenever we describe a call to a new dancer we must talk in terms that they will understand. Reading the CALLERLAB definition to the dancers is not a good teaching method. The definitions are written for leaders to interpret. Callers need to explain the new moves on a level the dancer can comprehend. Sometimes you might need to describe the action in different ways. Most of the times you can read the dancers faces to determine if they comprehend. I like to use the phrase, "Deer in the headlight look" when I see the dancers wide eyed and stunned. This is a good sign I need to re-explain or demonstrate again what I just worked.

It is important to let the dancers win! They need to feel confident. They need to be constantly rewarded with praise and motivated by success. Smiling faces will make them return to your next session. Proper judgment is necessary to know the level of complexity you can reach for each new call. Most of the time what new dancers need is floor time. I like to call it "Wind in the face" dancing. Let them experience the call up to speed and let them have fun! Use the new calls in a singing routine in order for them to experience proper timing.

Nothing beats a good lesson plan. This falls under the heading of programming again. The plan will serve as a road map to the final objective of success for the new dancer. Preparation is key. The caller must be the best dancer first. He/she must have a thorough understanding of all the calls being taught. The caller must be aware of the pitfalls and how to avoid them. The material must be presented professionally with confidence including history and styling. Don't forget the heritage that we are teaching with customs and rituals that affect the dance. Provide all the tools necessary for them to succeed. Lists, books, VCR tapes, and even CD Rom's are available for dancers to study at their leisure. Be patient, correct errors early, avoid over teaching, praise and encourage the dancers, accentuate the positive and reinforce the FUN! Sounds like a tall order, doesn't it? If you have any questions ask. Many before you can assist you and would be willing to help if it meant new dancers were getting involved. The fate of the activities future is in your hands. Let's get motivated to make a difference spreading fun like a wild fire.

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