

Dancing Movement versus Spatial Orientation

Kip Garvey

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Watch a new dancer class. Watch the dancers. See how they learn each call. At first, they learn movements. They relate the movements to the calls. They do not realize they are ends, centers, leader, or trailers.

It continually amazes me how some callers believe that new dancers immediately comprehend the totality of definitions, the nuances of position-oriented language, or intricacies of formation awareness. They do not. Let me repeat, new dancers do not know these things. Just because a caller states and relates position-speak to dancers while teaching, new dancers at first only know the movements. There may be, in special situations, new dancers who realize positional aspects of calls, but they are an extreme minority.

Over time, and many hours of dancing experience, new dancers begin slowly to comprehend these things. However, in the beginning they do not. In my half century of teaching, I have only seen new dancers develop spatial awareness right away one time, in a University setting where the new dancers were highly intelligent individuals, all of whom were in a high velocity learning environment. In every other instance in my teaching career, dancers simply are not spatially aware of their positions within Formations until well into the learning process.

The average new dancer learns movements initially. The dancer relates these movements to names of calls. This is easily observable because many new dancers make the same mistakes, like trying to Courtesy Turn on every left hand of a Square Thru, or immediately rolling to the right whenever they find themselves facing out. These common and repeated mistakes arise because dancers learn movements first, and only later become spatially aware. This is simply how new dancers learn.

We can try to mitigate this normal learning behavior using different techniques, but this learning process will never be totally avoided. Initially, dancers learn movements, not definitions. Ask a new dancer to recite the definition of a call. The answer will be vague, not well articulated, and punctuated with arm and body gesticulations while they try to show you the *movement* of the call.

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Nor can newer dancers be taught formation and position awareness right from the get-go. Many callers will argue with this, but it ignores the normal learning process. New dancers do not develop spatial orientation until they have been square dancing for many hours, often as many as 40 or 50 hours of dancing. Some will become spatially oriented sooner. Others will take many more hours. Some will take years.

Spatial orientation is adaptation and awareness of how a dancer is positioned relative to other dancers in the square and relative to the Formations and Arrangements the dancers move through. Dancers only begin to appreciate and understand the nuances of call definitions after they have developed some spatial orientation skills. If we assume our learners know spatial orientation when they do not and we continue teaching calls based on this assumption, we risk the chance that we push the dancers into a state of frustration.

Once dancers become frustrated to the point they cannot see themselves succeeding, they lean toward quitting. In the rush to complete all the calls necessary for dancers to complete the dance program, we end up appealing only to dancers who develop spatial orientation early on, and we abandon the rest. We end up appealing to the quick learners, giving up on the average dancers who don't quickly adapt.

Complicating this is the fact that our post-Basic definitions contain spatial references within Formations. By definition these calls state that ends do this, centers do that, leaders do this, trailers do that. If dancers have not developed some spatial orientation skills, these definitions make no sense. This makes our job impossible if we are trying to teach new dancers 97 calls in 9 months. Our failure to produce generations of new dancers over the last three decades proves that the current teaching methods are failing. They don't work.

I contend this is the primary reason why the 'rush to Plus' has produced extremely poor dancers on average. New dancers are driven to learn vocabulary and never get the dance time needed to learn spatial orientation. With no significant spatial orientation skills, new dancers simply continue to learn movements and get frustrated and even annoyed when callers call some combination of calls that requires dancers to re-route their memorized movement routine. We often see this with dancers who think they must Swing Thru before

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they can execute a Spin the Top, or begin automatically executing a Right and Left Thru after doing a Spin the Top even though the caller hasn't called it. They have trouble internalizing fractional calls, like doing a Square Thru some fractional number of hands, or a DoSaDo once and a half. Yet, I have seen callers bombard a floor with these types of calls and then chastise the dancers for not knowing their Basics. Very poor form.

The dancer who is not spatially oriented may never appreciate extemporaneous changes to the movements they have learned. Often they get very frustrated when a caller tries to push them beyond their comfort zone. Though a caller may think he is expanding their horizons by giving them calls delivered with interesting variations, the dancer is confused and frustrated, sometimes to the point of quitting altogether.

The lack of spatial orientation results from a learning curriculum that is too fast paced, contains too many calls, and lacks the single most important element for learning spatial orientation – time. New dancers need time. Time is the one thing they have been deprived of for the last three decades or more. There is no short cut for learning spatial orientation. Yet, class after class, year after year, we keep pushing new dancers faster and faster, depriving them of what they most need.

It is not just the multiplicity of calls. It is shorter dance sessions. We previously conducted classes that were two or more hours in length. Today's classes generally are much less than that, often just one and a half hours, sometimes less.

The results have finally come to roost with many of the oldest and successful square dance clubs closing their doors and disappearing forever. The only thing that will change this is giving new dancers the time they need to learn completely, to develop spatial orientation, and to enjoy dancing.

The definitions of calls in later dance programs require dancers to be spatially oriented, to know ends, centers, leaders, trailers, and be aware of Formations. Pushing dancers into these later programs when they are not ready will discourage many of them and may chase them out of square dancing. Even if they stay in square dancing, the quality of dancing will suffer, a condition acerbically known as 'dumbing down' the dance. No matter what new

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plan, scheme, or program we use to increase our numbers, it had better offer new dancers more time to dance or it, too, will fail.

When dancers are not properly prepared and are not spatially oriented, they threaten to jeopardize the integrity of all subsequent dance programs. As they attempt to assimilate into the next dance program, they bring with them two things: A continued lack of spatial orientation, and a near guarantee of failure. In harsher terms, it is a cancer that permeates all our dance programs and assures the degradation of subsequent dance programs.

Now, if that last sentence upsets you, don't worry. Things will never reach that point because there simply will not be enough new dancers to feed and sustain subsequent dance programs. If we don't fix this extremely obvious problem now, we won't see any upward migration to subsequent dance programs because there simply won't be any new dancers coming through the pipeline. Instead, we will see Plus and Advanced clubs begin to close their doors, Advanced weekends and festivals begin to dry up. We are seeing this right now.

It is high time for square dance leadership in the United States, and perhaps certain overseas countries, to wake up. We need Basic and Mainstream dancing to be healthy in every geographic area. We need new dancers to have a chance to dance, learn, and enjoy the activity. The rush to Plus must stop, and must stop now. There are solutions out there that are proven successes. Investigate them. Embrace them. Implement them.

It you are lucky enough to live in an area that has a strong and healthy Mainstream program, do everything in your power to support it. If you are in an area that has no Mainstream dancing, get to work and help develop Mainstream dancing.