



Phone: (802) 598-6757

Email: Kevin@FirstStepDance.com

Amateur Dancers

November/ December, 2004

Teaching Great Group Classes

by Kevin Laddison

Although taking private lessons is the fastest and most efficient way to learn to dance, not everyone (especially not beginners) is willing to put the financial commitment into those lessons and many people choose to take group classes instead. Also, many people begin dancing as a social activity, and group classes are much better at filling this need than are private lessons.

The ideal size for a group class depends on several factors, the most important of which is the size of the space where the class will take place. There should be enough space for everyone to move around while dancing, but not so much room that the class is lost in a huge space. The class should be large enough to cover the instructor's time and overhead for teaching the class; while being small enough so that the instructor can interact with the students. The class should also be large enough to offer a variety of partners, but not so large that couples who attend together never see their preferred partner! Students tend to prefer "small" classes because there is lots of personal contact, while teachers often prefer "large" classes for financial reasons. Of course good teachers also understand the value of "small" classes because they offer the highest quality of instruction and allow the instructor and students to build a relationship that benefits both sides.

In my opinion, the most important element of a good group lesson is trading partners. The best way to learn to lead and follow is to dance with many different people. Some dancers will be stronger, and some will be weaker, but each experience will be different. Dancers will learn something from each of their partners, and will make friends among their classmates, thus enhancing the learning experience.

Once the students have arrived in class, a good way to teach is to demonstrate a pattern or technique with a partner, and then break it down separately for leaders and followers. If there are co-instructors, both sides can be done at the same

time. If there is only one instructor, then it is a good idea to teach the leader's part first so that they can be practicing their movements while the instructor teaches the follower's part. Once most of the leaders and followers can do the pattern by themselves, demonstrate again with a partner; this time including the lead/follow signals necessary to make the pattern work.

Once the students can do the pattern separately and you have demonstrated the lead, put the students together so that they can dance through the pattern slowly. It is important to trade partners so that everyone gets to practice with at least two different dancers, especially if there is a large imbalance between the number of leaders and followers. Even if the class is balanced, it is still a good idea to trade partners so that everyone in class gets to dance with at least two other people; as this will identify if one half of the partnership needs additional assistance. Answer any questions before starting to dance to music, and trade partners during the music so that everyone gets to dance with at least two partners.

It is generally accepted that it takes about 20 minutes to teach a basic or simple intermediate pattern in this manner, so in a one hour class it should be possible to teach three patterns. It is a good idea to spend part of that time on linking the patterns together so that they can be used immediately on the dance floor.

In addition to teaching dance patterns and technique, it is important that group classes meet the unspoken needs of students. Trading partners helps everyone meet their social goals, but it is also important that people enjoy the classes, or they won't continue dancing. Most beginners want to learn to dance for the fun of it, so make classes fun and upbeat.

Keeping classes fun and upbeat is challenging, but it is a skill that can be learned. Try to keep group classes fun by including occasional jokes and exaggerated demonstrations of what poor dancing looks like. After demonstrating something properly, purposefully demonstrate it in an exaggeratedly bad way to show how not to do it. Of course, then you need to demonstrate properly again to ensure that people don't imitate the bad technique! It also helps to have a partner who can play the "straight man" for jokes, but that takes time to develop.

Other ways to keep group classes fun might include having everyone applaud after each song; it makes people feel great, even if they weren't that confident while actually dancing. Congratulate everyone at the end of each class, and again at the end of any series of classes, and encourage everyone to applaud for their classmates. Instructors might also encourage "banter" between the students and teacher because it takes a lot of stress out of the dance class if the students make jokes as well. It will also help to ensure a great group class if instructors give out steplists that are as detailed as possible. It is especially important for leaders to learn pattern names so that they can use them as hooks while

practicing and dancing.

A great group class that encourages beginners, and is fun and upbeat, will ensure that first-time dancers become life-long dancers!