

Dance Calling: Efficient, Effective Walk-throughs

Carol Ormand, November 2005

carol.ormand@alumni.carleton.edu; (608) 213-1618

Dancers want to have fun, and one of our responsibilities as callers is to help them do so, as efficiently and effectively as we can. I think the walkthrough is one of the keys.

My guiding principle: The dancers, the musicians, and I are all there to have fun. I want to do what I can to facilitate that.

It's worth thinking about what you want to accomplish in a walk-through. What do you want to accomplish in a walk-through? Here are several possibilities, not all of which would apply in any one situation:

1. Teach the sequence of the dance
2. Teach a new figure or two
3. Teach a bit of styling
4. Gain the dancers' trust

It's my philosophy that I should accomplish what I want to accomplish in the minimum amount of time that I can, and in as pleasant a way as possible - that is, the dancers should enjoy the process, or at the very least should not feel uncomfortable, frustrated, confused, or bored. So, let's consider each possible goal in turn.

1. Teaching the sequence of the dance: If the dancers know the figures, then teaching the sequence is a fairly simple exercise; all you have to do is get the dancers' attention, then tell them the sequence, watching to make sure they're following along. But remember that this should be a pleasant process? How do you get the dancers' attention, pleasantly, when they're ignoring you? I don't know any formulaic answers to this question. It's worth thinking about in advance, watching callers you like to see what they do, and experimenting with new ideas, to figure out what will work for you.

Are there any tricky aspects to the sequence of the dance? If so, you should know what they are in advance, and have some strategies planned for explaining them, so that you can pre-empt any problems. And what if someone is only half listening, and gets confused during the walk-through? What can you do to get them back on track? Brainstorm a list of options to have in the back of your mind.

2. Teaching a new figure: Suppose the dance includes a non-standard figure, or suppose there are new dancers on the floor, unfamiliar with some of the standard figures. Then you will have to teach some figures. How will you explain them? What words will you use? Will you use a demonstration? [I'd recommend not more

than twice during an evening, as a personal rule of thumb. Demos are times that most of the dancers are standing around, not dancing.] If dancers don't get it from your explanation - (how will you be able to tell?) - what will you try next?

One invaluable tip I heard early on: tell dancers with whom to do something, then what to do. They need to know which way to face before they can start moving. For unusual figures, it can also help immensely to let dancers know where they will end up, before you tell them how to get there. And if they're in an unusual arrangement (boy-girl-girl-boy lines of four, for example), confirming that for them is very re-assuring. Think through the dance before you teach it, and see if you can figure out where dancers will get confused, then dispel their confusion by answering their questions before they ask.

3. Teaching a bit of styling: Since this is not actually, technically, completely required for the dancers to learn the dance, and because they just want to have fun, you will have to find ways to get the dancers to buy into the idea of learning whatever styling you want to teach them. It's worth thinking about how to motivate them to learn. What's in it for them, if they do what you want them to? And why do you want them to, anyway? It may be that the dancing is so rough that dancers are hurting each other; it may be that it is so messy that the band is having a hard time watching the dancers and staying together; it may be that it is so messy that you know experienced dancers who stay away from that dance series in droves, and you want to attract them back; it may be that you think the dance is more fun to do a certain way; it may be that you want to show the dancers the traditional way of doing a particular move that has evolved over the years.... The list could go on and on. Whatever the reason, think about how you will get the dancers to want to hear what you have to say.
4. Gaining the dancers' trust: This may well be a prerequisite to #3. In the words of Bruce Hamilton, you need to build up some capital with the dancers before you can spend it. That is, if you want them to trust you, you have to show them that you are trustworthy, that you will help them to have a good time. The simplest way I know to do this is to do a good job of #1 and #2 above.

In addition, if there is a beginners' session before the dance, I like to teach it myself, for essentially one reason: to gain the beginners' trust before the dance begins. I do this, as you might guess, by teaching them what they need to know, as efficiently as possible, in as pleasant a manner as I can.

Do not underestimate the power of gaining dancers' trust. When they trust you, they'll do *almost* anything you ask them to. When they don't, they'll resist even some of the most basic requests. In fact, they'll stop listening to you at all.

Just one more general note about walk-throughs: Did you notice that most of my possible goals for a walk-through start with the word "teach"? Think back to the teachers you had in school. What distinguished the best teachers you had from the worst ones? What lessons can you learn about good teaching, from your own experiences as a student? How about your experiences as a dancer? In my humble opinion, almost anyone can learn to call figures in time to the music. Learning to teach dances effectively and efficiently seems to be a much rarer talent.

Communication is a two-way street:

It's easy to think of your job as conveying information, and the dancers' job as listening to that information. But the dancers convey all kinds of information, too, and if you pay attention to it, you will constantly find ways to improve your teaching and calling. When the walk-through/dance/evening is going well, dancers communicate that to you in a variety of ways, most of them nonverbal. Likewise, when the walk-through/dance/evening is not going well, dancers express their dissatisfaction any number of ways. If possible, try to figure out what is not going well, file that information away, and later ask yourself what you could have done differently to prevent or solve that problem. (Likewise, when you notice that something worked particularly well, file that information away for later, too - so that you can do the same thing the next time.) In my humble opinion, once again, almost anyone can learn to call dances. But the really great callers never stop asking themselves how they could do it better.

Resources:

If you were going to read just one book on calling, I would suggest Bruce Hamilton's absolutely masterful booklet about dance leadership (Notes on Teaching Country Dance). It's available from the Country Dance and Song Society (www.cdss.org), which also has many other resources that might interest you: other books about calling, books of dances, recordings of dance music. They also run nearly a dozen different week-long dance and music programs every summer, several of which typically include callers' workshops.

As an aside, if you are not yet a member of CDSS, I strongly recommend that you become one, so that you can support a great, national (actually, international) organization devoted to preserving and promoting traditional American dancing and music, and so that you will receive their annual catalog, along with bimonthly announcements of new books and recordings as they come out (included in the newsletter). Each newsletter also includes a contra dance, and fairly often there are articles of interest to callers. Check out their webpage for more information.

Finally, experienced callers are one of your most valuable resources. Observe, ask questions, and imitate what works well.