

Help!

Dance workshop by Pat Petersen, Durham, NC, 13 March 2010

Experienced dancers like it when newcomers arrive; we want them to feel the joy of dancing & community that we know & love. We want them to have the best experience possible, without feeling overwhelmed by the complexities of more difficult dances & without thinking that they're "ruining" the dance for others. And we want them to have FUN!

We all "lose it" from time to time on the dance floor; it's not only the newcomers and less experienced dancers who need help from time to time. How can we best help each other to have a fun, non-frustrating dance experience? How can we ask for help when we need it? What do we do if we don't get it?

How to give help

•*Don't talk, don't touch!*

•Why not?

Talking can overload sensory input; a less experienced dancer is already working hard to listen to the teacher and the music, to remember what various calls mean and what to do next, to avoid collisions, etc.

Talking can distract both your partner and other dancers around you from paying attention to the caller.

When you talk while the caller is teaching or prompting, you send the message that what you are saying is more important than what the caller is saying.

People can be sensitive to being touched by strangers. And no one enjoys being pulled or shoved.

People learn better when they figure things out themselves.

•Then what?

Gestures: eyes, hand, arm, shoulder, body, feet (see Bruce Hamilton's essay "Teaching Courtesies").

Eye contact.

•*Exceptions:* especially with experienced dancers who are having a momentary lapse, often just a single word will be gratefully accepted: "Hey," "corners," etc. Saying someone's name can get their attention. With touch, it's a little more difficult, but a light touch on the shoulder to someone whose back is to you and is facing the wrong direction might be ok.

•*Model good dancing;* tend to your own dancing first, dancing well and beautifully. Don't let "helping" distract you from being where you need to be, when you need to be there.

•*Allow mistakes to happen,* and accept them graciously. If a dancer is late or slow, consider what can easily be left out or changed: e.g., a set, a turn single, circle all the way, 2-hand (or any other) turn can always be left out. A cast around the outside of the set to your diagonal's place can be turned into a scurry across the set to that place without sending the dance awry. As Bruce Hamilton says, the judging in this sport is all about style points; it's not necessary to go around all the slalom poles.

•If you think someone hasn't understood a particular instruction, *ask the teacher* to go over it again, even if you yourself understand it. Others may feel too shy to ask, or may not know that they've misunderstood the figure.

•*Tune in* to the kind of help needed, and how best to give it: a quick word or gesture, a subtle lead, or just leaving something out.

What to do when you need help

•*Take a deep breath,* smile, relax, and DON'T PANIC!

•*Look around,* see what others do, especially your partner and the one who's dancing your role in the next set.

•*Hold out both hands,* see if someone reaches for one.

•Don't be shy about *asking* if a teaching instruction is unclear. (It may be unclear to others as well!)

How to accept it

•*Be open to being led;* be sensitive to gestures, leads and signals. If you are holding someone's hand, be aware of any leading that person might be doing. A bit of muscle tension in the arm will help ("giving weight").

•*Take a hand* (or two) that's offered.

•*Keep moving,* preferably in the direction that's indicated.

•*Think ahead* to where you need to be next. Don't be afraid to leave things out. (See above)

What to do when you don't get it

- Take a deep breath, smile, relax, and DON'T PANIC!
- See above, "*Allow mistakes to happen.*" The best dancers are the ones who have made the most mistakes. (Who said that??) See if you can figure out where you need to be for the next figure; or progress to the next place and wait for the next round of the dance.
- Heads up, look around, watch others, mirror their actions.
- Keep moving, preferably forward!
- Say HELP!

This handout accompanied a workshop on helping given by Pat Petersen at the Sun Assembly Spring DanceFest, 13 March 2010. Thanks to Bruce Hamilton and Jenny Beer for their suggestions for improvement. Please do not use without permission.