Move to the Beat of the Music
by Tom Halpenny
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I began learning Square dance five years ago, after Scottish dancing for the previous twelve years. The club caller and dance teacher Jim Hattrick explains his main goal for Square dance lessons is to get dancers to "move to the beat of the music". Jim's popular teaching methods regularly attract 70 club members and new dancers to his weekly lessons in a friendly social setting. Moving to the beat of the music, while having fun with friends, sends a message of positive feelings to the limbic brain.

This year I expanded my interest to explore Irish Ceili dance, English Country dance, Contra dance, and International Folk dance. I had an opportunity to observe how all these folk dance forms approach teaching dancers to move to the beat of the music.

Teachers of all dance forms guide dancers among the actions:
1. Dance while moving to the beat of the music
2. Move to learn the pattern to the music or leader's count
3. Stand and observe others move to learn the pattern to the music or leader's count
4. Stand and listen to the leader talking

An effective dance teacher strikes a balance among the necessary actions, with the goal to spend as much time as possible on action number one.

I originally observed that Square dance has more continuous motion compared with Scottish dance. The caller announces the next move just in time for dancers to flow through the dance figures. On the other hand, Scottish dance motion with the skip-change step is twice as fast as walking, and the pas-de-basque setting step is more aerobic, so we need resting time between bursts of energy.

After I learned Square dance, I became sensitive to standing while learning a Scottish dance. Geoffrey Selling discussed the topic in a TACTalk article, "Why Aren't We Attracting More Dancers to Scottish Country Dancing? (especially from the greater dance community)". The article explains how teaching a Scottish dance can involve excessive standing and surprisingly little dancing, compared with English Country dance's greater motion.

http://www.rscds-swws.org/news/tac/WhyArentWe.pdf

Since I practice several folk dance forms, I designed an experiment to measure the percentage of time I am moving during various dance activities. I have a goal to keep moving, and I have been wearing a pedometer for three years to measure my progress. In addition to measuring steps, my current pedometer measures "Activity Time". The timer runs while I am moving and pauses when I am inactive. I use a stopwatch to record the elapsed time during a dance or a dance class and I also record the activity time. I reset the activity timer and start the stopwatch after sets have formed and the dance leader begins teaching or briefing a dance, and stop the stopwatch after the final chord of the dance. I pause the stopwatch when some unavoidable technical delay or unrelated reason occurs. The ratio of activity time to elapsed time gives the percentage of time I was moving:

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\text{Activity Time Percentage} = \frac{\text{Activity Time}}{\text{Elapsed Time}} \times 100
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I gathered activity data for 72 dancing events over 16 weeks. Most of the data was for Scottish dance (52 hours) and Square dance (35 hours), and I made an effort to get a sense of activity for other folk dance forms. We can view my Average Activity Time Percentage results in the chart. The Square dance "Dance" activity led with 86%, and the "Class" activity averaged 60% when the caller taught the moves. The Scottish dance "Dance" activity averaged 51%, and the "Class" activity averaged 38% for teaching dances. English Country dance averaged 52%. Other folk dance forms averaged in the 61-73% range.

The activity time measurement excludes the intensity of physical activity and interest level, so we need to interpret the results. After each dancing event, I subjectively noted whether the event gave me a positive, neutral, or negative interest level. I observed a strong correlation between Activity Time Percentage and interest level. Most dance events were positive, however there were a significant number of Scottish dance classes with neutral or negative interest, especially classes with excessive standing and less listening to the beautiful music. All Scottish dance "Dances" were positive. Irish Ceili dance and Contra dance have the quality of being both aerobic and high Activity Time Percentage. Square dancers move to the beat of the music with walking steps, and I am able to increase the walking energy with more spring in my steps and travel the moves with a slightly longer path.

The Scottish dance class Activity Time Percentage averaged 38% with a range of 30-53%. Dance classes with a value greater than 40% were generally positive interest, while less than 40% gave me a neutral or negative interest level. I wonder how much Scottish dance class interest and attendance would improve if teachers could consistently raise the Activity Time Percentage above 40%, with a focus on moving to the beat of the music.

This article finally explains to fellow dancers and dance teachers who have been curious about the numbers I have been writing on Post-it notes while dancing. Interested readers can contact me to view the spreadsheet file with the activity time data. I would like to thank my dance teacher friends for your skilled and entertaining teaching efforts.