



Why Aren't We Attracting More Dancers to Scottish Country Dancing?

(especially from the greater dance community)

by Geoffrey Selling (reprinted with permission)

If Scottish country dancing is so much fun (which it is!), the music so exciting (which it is!), the dance groups so welcoming (which most are) and our community so interesting and full of engaging traditions and events (which it is!), why then are we not inundated with new dancers, especially from the greater dance community---English, square, contra, salsa, folk, and vintage dancers in particular?

It's a complex question and there's no simple answer. Back in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, many Scottish groups and Branches had many classes, frequent socials, and special events with an abundance of long-time dancers as well as newcomers. Not any more! Many groups are smaller and some are struggling just to get a set for a class or social dance. Yet dance is alive and well in North America.

Though there are many possible external factors, I believe the over-riding problem is internal in what is supposed to be our greatest strength: our teaching! If that shocks you, brace yourself for some pretty hard-hitting observations about the teaching of SCD in North America (and elsewhere!).

Let me introduce my concern with an account of an event I attended years ago. The event was a combination English and Scottish country dance workshop, attended by both groups of dancers. The morning focused on Scottish and the afternoon on English. Both workshops were taught by well-known and respected teachers who were well-prepared with interesting and fun material. The teachers had engaging personalities, and gave cheerful feedback to their classes. Both sessions included top quality live music. Each teacher had 2½ hours for class, with an interval. The attending students were mostly experienced and advanced dancers from the English and Scottish dance communities. In the Scottish portion of the day, we did four dances of upper intermediate to advanced level. The teacher explained each movement or formation in great detail, while the class stood and listened. If something didn't

work, the teacher explained it again, slowly and clearly, while the class stood. If that didn't work, the teacher demonstrated the movement. Each element of each dance was carefully presented while we stood and listened. From time to time we would dance eight or 16 bars. Eventually, all the preparations for the dance had been completed, and then we formed sets and the teacher slowly, clearly and oh-so-thoroughly recapped the dance, while the class stood and listened. When the chord sounded, the dancing began. If a set broke down, it was up to the set members to "save it", which they sometimes could do, or not. The teacher watched from the front of the room. The teacher was positive but also noted what had broken down and what had been difficult (in case we weren't aware of how we'd messed up). This pattern was repeated throughout the morning. It was typical of many classes and workshops I've attended: lots of talking, lots of clear analysis, lots of standing around and listening, surprisingly little dancing given the 150 minutes of class time and shockingly little music, given the talent and eagerness of the musicians.

In the afternoon, the English dance teacher took over and taught and we danced 11 dances, also of an upper intermediate to advanced level (some were very challenging!). What a contrast to the four Scottish dances! From the moment the class started, we were moving. Music was used at every available moment. Familiar bits were danced right off and harder parts were immediately demonstrated and then the class tried them, dancing to tempo. When whole dances were being danced, the teacher called the formations until the class was secure with them and then left us to carry on, which we did. The teacher seemed more like a dance facilitator, keeping us moving and dancing, slipping in teaching points and phrasing bits as needed. Despite learning 11 dances with lots of tricky moments and unusual bits, the afternoon felt more like a social event than a class.

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The contrast between the two classes was striking. One could easily notice how restless the English dancers became during the very didactic and talky Scottish class, but what was more surprising was that the Scottish dancers seemed to accept all the explaining and verbal directions as a given. So familiar were the Scottish dancers to talky and static teaching that this pleasant lesson did not seem to strike them as off-putting. The dancers stood quietly listening to teaching points, but it was obvious when the dancing started that many of the points had not been absorbed. The Scottish dancers did not fare much better than the English dancers on some of the dances. But the Scottish dancers seemed to accept the chatty standing around approach as “our way.”

At the potluck supper that followed, I sat with some English dancers who gave me an earful of opinions. One woman quietly told me that she “loved the dances and music, but can't stand for long periods like that. It makes my back hurt.” Another more bluntly said, “That's why I don't go Scottish dancing. The dancing is cool and the music is really neat but I'm not willing to go and get lectured to about this and that. I'm finished with school! I just want to dance.” A third English dancer remarked that for her, “Scottish dancing involves long periods of standing around listening and then a few panicked minutes of frenetic movement.” Given that one of the dances had required 40 minutes of teaching but the actual dancing only lasted two minutes (a 4 x 32 set dance), I understood her point of view. I felt similarly.

I am not suggesting that every Scottish dance teacher teaches in this talky way while the class stands around, but it is certainly more common than many teachers think. I know that Scottish dance tutors emphasize demonstrating, not talking. I know they encourage candidates to keeping the class moving, isolating and practicing elements and then incorporating them. But even teachers who as candidates kept their classes moving, often revert to a more didactic approach. I dance in a Polish folk dance performance group and occasionally attend folk dance festivals. On more than one occasion, while sitting back stage or in a dressing

room, I've heard remarks from other dancers about the participation Scottish classes where “the teacher talked and talked about pointed toes and Scottish styling but we didn't do much dancing.”

I recently attended a beginners' class at a major workshop to see what I might learn. The teacher ably demonstrated the rhythm of the steps and then had the class try. But as the lesson progressed into the finer points of the steps, the teacher kept asking the class to “think about your turn out” or “think about the skip,” as if these were primarily mental activities. Since these are physical movements, I believe classes need to feel the movements through exercises, then practice them to gain facility and use them often to build stamina, strength and flexibility. Thinking about pointing my toe isn't nearly as effective as experiencing what a pointed toe actually feels like and then using that in slow motion to practice a step.

In a number of more experienced classes I've attended, teachers seem to believe that learning a dance from just a talk-through is the ultimate goal - that walking a movement or formation is only necessary when the class is hopelessly confused. In one class, during a complex briefing, another teacher asked, “Can we walk this? I don't get it.” The teacher replied with some irritation, “No, you don't need to. It's not that hard. Just listen very carefully.” While we all stood in silence, the choreography was explained yet again. When we finally tried dancing it, the set broke down almost immediately and the teacher reluctantly (though pleasantly) allowed us to walk it.

In my experience, some dancers pick up dance directions from words (verbal learners), but most need to see it (visual learners) or walk it (kinesthetic learners or some combination). I don't believe that the verbal learners are the highest order Scottish dancers or that their way of learning should be considered better than other ways. Our teaching needs to meet all kinds of learners where they are and help them along the path towards better dancing, yet always with an eye towards the enjoyment of the dance.

I've frequently attended classes both in my own Branch and at summer schools and workshops where teachers present too many points, or focus on teaching

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points that most of the class will be unable to achieve. Too often, there isn't enough emphasis on the basic rhythm of a step, but teachers start working on foot positions and fine points when many students haven't mastered the basic movement. One dancer I know was critiqued by a teacher weekly for more than 20 years for her two-beat pas de basque. At some point, we have to let go and allow our dancers some of their failings. If we focus on teaching points that the class can actually achieve and improve on, they'll be and feel more successful (so will we!) and there'll be a lot less time spent standing around listening to teaching points that go nowhere.

I would also love us to get rid of the long in-class recap of a dance that we've just been practicing for 30 minutes. How about reminding us of the first eight bars and then letting us dance?

I'm not quite sure why Scottish country dancing has so frequently produced teachers who talk and explain instead of having their classes move, walk and dance. We have such a careful teacher training and examina-

tion process that seems to emphasize a more active approach to learning. It could be though, that teacher candidates, eager to show their examiners that they've learned all the key teaching points about a step or formation, try to get them all in, every time they teach--even years after their exam has faded from memory. Are we unintentionally replaying our exams? Are we trying to make too many points in too short a time? But returning to the English/Scottish dance teaching contrast. Master Scottish and English teacher, Bruce Hamilton, is well known for saying several versions of the following: Don't talk it if you can walk it. Don't walk it if you can dance it. If we talked less and showed more, if we made fewer points but kept everyone moving, if there was more dancing in our dance classes, mightn't we attract some of those English, folk and vintage dancers? After all, Scottish Country dancing is about as beautiful and exciting a social dance genre as you can find.

