



# Advice for aspiring swing dance teachers.



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## **About these notes:**

These notes are intended to act as a brief *vade mecum* for anyone thinking of teaching swing dance. They assume that you are already an experienced and competent social dancer, and that you can lead and, ideally, follow.

I writing this, I am *absolutely not* trying to set myself up as any kind of 'authority' on the subject. I have, however, been teaching Lindy Hop for about fifteen years, and Balboa, Shag, Charleston etc for about twelve. Based on this and other teaching, I have been elected to the UK's Royal Society of Arts and the UNESCO International Council of Dance. I am, though, the first to admit that I still have a huge amount to learn about both dance and teaching. I just hope that this short document will help build the confidence of anyone who wants to give new people, and places, a change to get swing-dancing.

## **Before you start - introspection and imagination**

Before you start, it may be sensible to ask yourself, honestly, what your motives are for wanting to teach in the first place. There are many possible motives, and I would not presume to say that some are better than others, but some possible motives may be addressed a better way. For example, if you want to teach mainly to be the centre of attention or to show off that you are such a great dancer, you may find competition gives you more of what you want, and more easily (especially since, when teaching is good, the students are the centre of attention, and when it is *really* good, they think they did it all for themselves).

Either way, realize now that teaching (well) takes a lot of work, and patience, and may involve some unexpected drawbacks (such as making many dancers either nervous of dancing with you at all, or thinking that any social dance with their teacher has to be some kind of exam in which they have to throw at you any move you have ever taught them!). It can, however, be tremendously rewarding.

## **Also before you start - a boring (but very important!) administrative detail**

So... assuming you still want to do this... you need to spend a few moments being pessimistic, in order to avoid serious worry later. The most frightening possibility is that someone in one of your classes will sustain a serious injury, will hold you responsible, and will sue you for an amount of money that looks more like a telephone number than an invoice. The world is getting more litigious: just one look at the shark lawyers' advertisements on daytime television will convince you that this is now true even in the UK. Alas, no amount of pupils' signatures on forms with phrases about teachers taking no responsibility for accidents will protect you under current law (that changed about 15 years ago). It also makes no difference at all if you are making a profit or teaching free of charge. Therefore, **do not think of teaching without public liability insurance!!** Also, do not assume that you are covered by a venue's or group's insurance – you probably won't be, even if some barman at the venue says you are: remember it's your money/house on the line, not his. Of course, if you perform, you probably already have public liability insurance: you will still need to let your insurers know you will be teaching, because your basic performance policy may not cover this.

### **Where to start**

If you can, start by teaching advanced classes at an established dance venue, then head down through intermediate ones, attempting beginners' ones last. This is the opposite of what most people do, because they think that the main source of difficulty in a class is the set of dance moves and technical points. *It isn't.*

When you are teaching an advanced class, you can take for granted that your pupils are committed, skilled at learning dance moves, they know all the basics thoroughly, and they are capable of improvising seamlessly to cover some point you never remembered to tell them explicitly (such as how to change hands, or how persuade the lady to change her weight, etc). They are also probably used to a great variety of teachers and styles. Advanced dancers can learn a lot from, and still enjoy, a class that is not actually very well taught (in fact, they may even gain more from it).

When you are teaching a class of absolute beginners, you can take nothing for granted except for the fact the people in front of you have, for whatever reason, decided that they want to try learn the swing dance you are teaching (probably). They will have a huge range of learning speeds. Some may be very under-confident and in need of frequent encouragement and assurance, others may think they know it all already because they once did something vaguely like partner dancing at a school Disco ten years ago. Some may feel awkward about personal space and touching other people, especially strangers, while others may be so keen on 'touching other people' that this becomes a problem. Some will be shy about any mistakes and others may be very competitive. Some will have danced other styles before, and will know about leading and following, will be good at 'seeing and doing', dissociating motions in different parts of their bodies, and at knowing their left from their right. Others will have none of these

skills, and will not even detect that their bodies are not doing what they think they are doing. All will be using their first lesson to decide what your classes are like. Are these evenings going to be fun, friendly and confidence-boosting, or are they going to be hours spent in miserable, confidence-sapping confusion? Does the dance itself look fun or serious, social or competitive, worth learning or best avoided? In an absolute beginners' class, you have to deal with all of this and more: *the actual steps are the easy part*.

Having said this, if you are starting off lessons somewhere completely new, and you have no opportunity to give advanced classes first, then you just have to throw yourself in the deep-end. I hope that these notes help.

### **Starting off with an Advanced/ Intermediate Class**

If you are able to start by teaching experienced dancers, you will either be teaching a group that knows you already, or one to whom you are strangers. Each has its advantages. Your home crowd will be friendly and supportive (hopefully), and you will have a really good idea of what they can already do, and the styles of teaching to which they have become used. On the other hand, they know you are of them, so you had better be *very* careful not to give yourself any airs and graces! An away crowd will be more of an unknown quantity, but since whoever invited you will have probably already 'sold' you to them, possibly giving a description of your skills so glowing that you do not recognize it as applying to you, they will usually be very willing to accept you as experts. You may not feel this is warranted (you will, after all, know what international stars are like, and you know you are not one of them!), but you can't shrug it off completely without denting their confidence in you. If you are uncomfortable, deflect your expert status into something where you feel more comfortable (say your particular field is, for example, in teaching leader-follow communication on a social floor, or high-speed dance, or whatever fits well with what you will be doing). When you are introduced, your class will form their impression of you in about fifteen seconds – so think about what you will say, how extrovert you will be, the 'fun' or 'seriousness' of the class etc , beforehand.

Whether teaching 'home' or 'away', *plan your class beforehand!* There are many ways of organizing a class, but the most common is probably to teach a routine. In the weaker kind of class, the teaching of a routine with fancy moves seems to be the main point. Better teachers, though, will have thought carefully about some particular principles of dance they want to get across, and the routine will be a vehicle for this. Examples of such principles, embedded in a routine, are;

- Leading from the body
- Conserving momentum/rotation between moves
- Changing the rhythms in standard moves
- Rounded and linear swingouts, and their natural variations

(there are, of course, a zillion others).

Having planned your class, having written a routine that fits some suitable music, you need to practice the routine so that you can demonstrate it before the lesson. If possible, plan a routine with a 'false ending' and a real one, so that if you run out of time you can stop at the first ending and it will still seem natural. If the moves are intricate, it may be useful to find another track that is slower and still fits, for teaching. Then, you need to work out how to break each move down to teach it (see section below).

At the class, give your demo, and start teaching the first move. Depending on the complexity of moves, you may need to teach them one at a time or group them. Sometimes, it can help to intersperse difficult moves with simple beginners' moves to help people practice, and then to remove the padding once people are happy with the difficult parts. Whatever happens, keep a close eye on how your pupils are doing.

Other types of class may concentrate on aspects of dance that respond better to improvisation than to routines. Examples are classes on the structure of music (how to predict breaks, and so on), on how to dance to very fast or very slow music, on dancing blindfolded etc.

Hopefully, everything will go well, but it may not. Here are some common problems:

- The level is wrong (this is most common when you are 'away'): if the class finds everything easy (the less likely possibility), then be picky and help everyone get the moves 'just so'. If the level is right on average, but the pupils have a great range of abilities, you can help some get everything 'just so' and others get the basic move right even if they are far from being 'just so'. You may find, though, that you have greatly over-estimated the level of the dancers. This may be because of the description your hosts have given (I have known 'advanced' classes in some places be equivalent to our 'continuing beginners' classes in Edinburgh), or it may be because you are being unrealistic and forgetting how long it has taken you to work on your routine. The only thing to do is to slow down and accept that you will not get through the routine: if necessary, simplify or drop the tougher moves, or spend an hour on just two or three moves, which may actually be a brilliant lesson. What *not* to do, is to carry on regardless.
- You run out of time. This is common, even for experienced teachers. Just accept it and do not rush or try to cram a 15-minute move into the last 5-minutes of a class. Also, do not run on – it annoys people who are tired, have buses to catch etc.
- Style mismatch: You are teaching a routine that only works in Savoy-style and they all dance Dean Collins style, or vice-versa (Shag has similar issues). In a beginners' class, this is never a problem but it can be worse at higher levels because there is no way that you can teach a new style in

- a few minutes and then go on to advanced moves in that style. Of course, your conversation with your hosts should have identified this problem, but it does not always (lots of Californians who dance beautiful Dean Collins style claim that it is Savoy, although the reciprocal error is less common). I think all you can do is share the problem with them and find a new routine together (hopefully, you can dance both styles by now, at least a little). OR, share the problem, and switch to beginners' lesson in your style.
- You feel you are losing them (they look bored, or chatter): engage with them, and let them dance.

### **Your first Beginners' Class**

If you are teaching an absolute beginners' class, you will be faced with a bunch of people who regard you as an expert (however ridiculous that might seem to you!). In the first lesson, you need to achieve at least the following (I would say in this order of importance).

- Make a welcoming, friendly, supportive atmosphere
- Let them know it's fine not to come with a partner, not to be super-fit, not to have danced before (assuming all of these are true for your classes).
- Introduce swing dance as a whole
- Introduce and demonstrate, in a non-scary way, the dance you will be teaching them
- Let them know you too are still learning, and that learning never stops (in my experience, this always enhances their trust in the teacher, probably because they value your honesty)
- Let them hear some real swing music
- Teach them the stance and rhythm
- Teach them some basic dance steps and the idea of lead-follow (yes, I am serious about this being at the bottom of the list – although obviously you must get to it)

Always start by introducing yourselves, in as friendly a way as possible. When you get to the stage of partnering, encourage your pupils to introduce themselves to each other for a few moments every time partners change. It makes the evening more pleasant, and it helps with issues of 'personal space'. Also, encourage them to work together on problems and to be patient with each other.

The most common error that teachers make is to go too fast. Cover less rather than more, so that your pupils will do a little well, and will have confidence, rather than be bluffing their way through too much with a feeling of mounting panic. Our typical complete beginners' first classes (60 minutes, in only one of these styles) would be;

- Savoy Lindy: stance, basic rhythm, triple-time-jockey, swingout from side-by-side (leading introduced here), circle.
- Collegiate Shag: stance, basic rhythm, closed basic, turnout, change-of-places-reconnection.

- St Louis Shag: stance, rhythm, basic side by side, fall-off-the-log
- Balboa (we do this only for people who have done some other dance before): stance, rhythm, embrace, lead and follow in the basic, adding step-steps.
- Blues: stance, the walk, the basic, weight changes, improvisation.
- Charleston: stance, basic rhythm, ankle flaps, a few simple variations.

All involve much time to dance to music.

Provide constant reassurance, and at the end, point out that you have a room full of Lindy Hoppers (or whatever). This will be a big boost to people who probably thought, about 20 minutes in, that they could never do it.

When teaching, use the old rule: tell them what you are going to teach, teach them, tell them what you have taught them. Repetition in this way builds confidence.

Another old teaching rule is to present the same information in multiple ways. For example, explain in words what to do and demonstrate with your bodies, explain rhythms in a “baaaa-da-ba-BA” way *and* in the “One-hold-three-and-FOUR” way.

### **Helping people who are having problems**

At all levels, you may spot struggling couples. Sometimes they will know it and acknowledge it, asking for your help. More commonly, they will not, and will instead be bluffing their way through hoping you will not notice. You know you need to go over and help. If you know what is wrong, it is better to start by telling them (honestly) what is going well first, and then say focus on the problem. For example “Good! That swingout is looking really nice, but it will be better if we work on how to avoid getting too far apart at the end”. Then help. If they are getting lots of things wrong, pick the most critical and work on that first. Then praise their success in that, before picking up on the next thing.

If you don’t know what’s wrong, or who is causing it, it can help to separate the couple for a moment so that each pupil is dancing with one of the teachers. They are usually tense at this point, so again be careful to prefix a correction with a complement about things that are working. This is not patronizing – it is feedback.

Sometimes there are people who seem to ignore everything you say, week after week. They nod as you explain, but never change. I wish I knew a magic formula for helping them, but each time I have managed it has been by a long and individual campaign. Usually, there are serious confidence issues with these people, and the individual would rather not move away from their semi-successful bluffing, to the initially-worse trying it the right way.

Being honest about the problems you had when first meeting these moves can help boost the confidence of a pupil.

Try always to avoid having the whole class spectate one couple's struggles: keep them occupied while you help individuals.

### **Breaking moves down to teach them**

This is the most difficult bit of preparation, and can make a really great difference between mediocre and excellent teaching. There are two aspects;

- Working out all of the leads, and changes of weight (this can be harder for advanced dancers, because so many things become 'automatic' that you will find yourself doing things without knowing it)
- Trying to identify likely problems.

I use the following scheme, though I seldom get round to point 3 (I should more!).

1. First, have the leader think about the move and try to identify the leads (while dancing it).
2. Then, with the follower, see what happens when each of these is missed out or done wrongly in a way that is likely to happen. I find that it can really help in teaching if you demonstrate, with exaggeration if necessary, what happens if a lead is given badly – it really helps understanding, and it also creates a light 'comedy moment' (I stole this idea from Anne-Helene and Bernard from Toulouse, whom I regard as particularly fine teachers). It can also help you understand what is going wrong when a couple is struggling. You will find verbal descriptions of this kind of thing in our steps notes.
3. Having done this, try to teach your partner to lead you. If it works, you have \*probably\* dissected the move.

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