

Lesson 11: Just How Does One Learn to Dance?

By Kaye West

Mastering Timing

The first goal in learning to dance is mastering the basic rhythm of the dance, which means understanding concepts about musical timing plus the typical pattern or the dance rhythm. Some people have had the advantage of experiences in their youth which allowed them to acquire such information. Others have not. Besides dance instruction in any of its forms (ballet, tap, square dancing, modern dance, etc.), such experience includes musical training from playing a musical instrument, reading choral music, or even marching in cadence. While such individuals have an advantage in learning in a dance class, others can acquire such experience or get a refresher after years of non-use with information available 24/7 on the internet.

The concepts of musical timing, fortunately, are not difficult and can be learned. First the ideas must get into one's brain to create the first "neural pathway," and then the information must be repeated and rehearsed literally thousands of times in order to become habitual. Some folks contend that dance information may be in their head, but it hasn't migrated to their feet. That is simply a statement that there have been insufficient repetitions for the information to become part of their "muscle memory," otherwise known as their long-term memory.

The problem is *not* that they cannot learn to dance (*everyone* can), but rather they simply need more repetitions of the information.

In junior high I encountered a dance sequence which the other kids were doing and which I wanted to learn. There were only six counts, but the weight changes and timing were different from the step-tap, step-tap (the "chicken") we were doing in other situations. There was action on *each half count* (thus twelve parts), and the pattern of taking weight changes was irregular (sometimes on the count and sometimes midway into the count)! I remember practicing that sequence literally *thousands* of times! Eventually I could do it, but I had to work at it. Fortunately, most dance patterns and rhythms are not that complicated! Social Foxtrot and Single Swing, for example, each have four weight changes which occur regularly on counts 1, 3, 5, 6 (taking two counts for each slow and one count for each quick).

Consult <https://home.csulb.edu/~kwest/wido/articles/timing.pdf> for a tutorial on the ideas one should understand about timing. Additionally, find a tutorial for the Slow-Slow-Quick-Quick (SSQQ) pattern of Social Foxtrot and Single Swing at <https://home.csulb.edu/~kwest/wido/lessons/ssqq-tutorial.pdf>. This document describes a step-by-step sequence of what to practice to master the timing pattern needed for dancing eighty-five percent of music in a social dance situation. Because this information is readily available in writing (my dance students requested that I put information they were learning in writing so they could review it outside of class), literally anyone in the whole wide world can master this information if they choose to and if they apply themselves.

Comparing Ballroom, Line Dancing, and Round Dancing Classes

BALLROOM / SOCIAL DANCE

Dance studios are one place where patrons can find a group dance class (typically \$10 per person for a 30-45-minute lesson). Attending such classes are folks from beginners to advanced. Because of the large range of experience, instructors typically create a sequence of instruction which they present and provide practice for students to replicate. Often students rotate partnerships so everyone has a change to dance with other attendees. That can be helpful so that more experienced dancers can support those with less experience and helps dancers to get acquainted with their classmates.

While the instructors (generally a couple) are excellent models of how to dance, they often do not provide names for the figures they are doing, or if they do use names, they may not be standardized. What they present is limited by their own background of experience, which may include styling and patterns from either the American or the International style.

Also because of the wide range of abilities in such a class, instructors present patterns which include non-standard elements. Sometimes students video the instructors doing the patterns so they have a way to retain the information so they can practice later on their own.

Following the group lesson, the floor is open for social dancing so students can practice what they learned in class when music is played matching the rhythm which was taught. In ballroom and social dance situations it is courteous for **Leads** to dance with attendees beyond their “regular partner.”

Sequential social dance lessons for five rhythms are also available at <https://home.csulb.edu/~kwest/wido/wi-do.html>.

LINE DANCE

Line dance classes have become popular in recent years. Some of the well-known line dances have even been added to the syllabi for some ballroom dance associations! Classes can be found as a 30-minute lesson prior to a social dance (\$10 for the evening of dancing) or as a recurring one- to two-hour class (\$0-\$15). New dances are introduced and practiced, and, when taught by one teacher consistently, subsequent sessions include previously-taught routines for practice.

As a rule, dancers are expected to memorize the routines which are described by the number of “counts.” Typical dances are 32 counts (or 8 measures) in length, but there are both shorter and longer ones. The sequence typically ends by turning one-quarter so the same sequence can be danced facing the new direction, and it is repeated until the piece ends.

The various routines are set to specific pieces of music, and choreographers describe the steps in writing on “Stepsheets” which are available in a searchable database at <https://www.copperknob.co.uk/> The website (boasting over 161,000 routines) also contains videos of folks performing or teaching the routine so dancers can practice them and (eventually) memorize them.

Since everyone does the same routine, usually in lines, attendees can imitate others during the dance as needed. Sometimes, especially when learning a new routine, the instructor cues the dancers as to what to do next, but the vocabulary for line dancing is not standardized and various choreographers use terms which make sense to them. Terms are sometimes “step-cued” (meaning they describe what one foot at a time does), and other terms (according to an article on the above website) are borrowed from the ballroom vocabulary, but their meanings do not necessarily match what is understood in the ballroom world.

For example, their “chassé” is a sequence of steps going to the side only. The term is borrowed originally from ballet and chassés (three counts) can be forward or back (with the second step being a lock) in addition to the side. They also treat the terms “cha cha,” “triple,” “shuffle step,” and “polka step” as approximately synonymous, with the difference being a slight change in timing (they each have three steps in two counts with the first two terms taking weight at counts $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, 1 and the latter two using $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, 1).

ROUND DANCE

While round dancing began as simple folk dances performed in a circle and catalogued and replicated nationally by pioneers such as Lloyd (Pappy) Shaw, over the years it has evolved into non-competitive partnership dancing known today also as choreographed ballroom or cued ballroom dance. Teachers of this form of dancing (where a leader announces or cues the figure to do in the next measure) collaborate to

standardize various figures and phase them in levels of difficulty (to see their list of standardized figures, showing what one can learn in round dancing, go to <https://home.csulb.edu/~kwest/wido/rhythms.html>, select the desired rhythm, and when on that page select “___ Figures and Sources for How to Dance Them.”

This form of partnership dancing focuses on learning and fun. The only competition is with oneself to learn more or improve dancing pleasure by refining technique. Numerous rhythms incorporate both American and International styles, often interchangeably. New routines are constantly being choreographed to specific pieces of music, and wherever in the world the dance event occurs, cues are in English.

Additionally, the **Lead's** (Man's) and **Follow's** (Lady's) parts are both taught, so solo dancers can learn their part and dance with a phantom partner, or there can be two people of the same gender who partner each other with no implication of their sexual orientation.

Classes are nominally priced (\$7-10 for a two-hour session) and typically focus on one rhythm at a time. Some rhythms begin with phase one and two figures; others begin at phase 3 or 4. New rhythms have been added over the years with twenty of the most common listed on the above website.

Some people learn best visually, some auditorily, some by doing, and some with a combination of those modalities. Round dance teachers use all three as they explain figures, demonstrate how to do them, and provide a great deal of floor time to practice them, often using “hash cuing” which means they cue figures at random so dancers can also practice dancing to cues. The page referenced above with the list of standard figures also has places where written and video material is available, including footprints for basic figures.

And, Larry Caves (retired ASU ballroom dance director) and I are collaborating to share information for those wishing to refine their dancing (we have started with Cha Cha and have several other articles uploaded on improving dancing).

Round dancing also has written instructions (cue sheets) for over 30,000 routines which have been shared by creative choreographers. The routines correspond to the music and typically there are several different parts (our Cha Cha, for example, has three different parts with eight measures each). Find these at <https://roundalab.org/> > Cue Sheets > Index of Rounds (our cue sheets are also available from the Rhythms Chart at <https://home.csulb.edu/~kwest/wido/wi-do.html>). Also Roundalab has a data base showing how folks can find a class/round dance instructor or a dance event.

In short, round dancing provides sequential instruction with lots of floor time and much variety in a friendly, fun setting. It is highly recommended for your lifelong learning which provides exercise and socializing with friendly people in an inexpensive environment. Schedules for Mesa, Arizona (the Round Dance Capital of the World) is available at <https://gphurd.com/> > Mesa Brochure.

Ready to Get Started?

Resources are plentiful and readily available. Those with some dance experience who are also itching to get away for an incredible adventure can even experience the International Choreographed Ballroom Dance Association Convention held each July in different locations (one hall is dedicated to newer dancers). Sign up at <https://www.icbda.com>.

Meanwhile, convince a friend to take lessons with you and/or identify several friends who would like a class and persuade a round dance teacher to form a class for your group or ask a round dancer to share some figures with you at a social dance! That's how I got started years ago!

Remember the formula for success in *any* endeavor:

Success = Beginning + Perseverance