

# An Approach to Dealing with Mistakes

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## Abstract

*An approach commonly practiced and taught in Scottish Country Dancing is that mistakes are to be avoided; indeed, avoiding them is an important part of good dancing. I have experimented with an approach that instead treats mistakes as part of the fabric of social dancing. I describe the approach and report some results.*

## Introduction

The notion of mistakes ('faults' in some contexts) occupies an important place in Scottish country dancing — in class, in teacher training, and in certificate examinations. But this importance exacts a cost in retaining new dancers, in the passion and self-expression that the typical dancer shows, and in the external perception of SCD.

I experimented with treating mistakes as just one of many threads in the fabric of social dancing. This experiment required us to find new ways of thinking and teaching. After some trial and error I settled on a few methods that felt right, and that brought both short-term and long-term results.

I first talk about what I mean by "mistakes," and about the setting in which I did this experiment. Next I discuss the costs of the traditional approach to mistakes. After that I discuss what I tried and what happened. The final section summarizes the experiment and its findings.

## Scope

I have taught Scottish and English country dancing continuously for about 35 years. This has included dancing and teaching at levels from basic through performing to tutoring teachers, and in weekend, week-long and semester-long settings. I have seen, and made, many mistakes.

I use "mistake" to refer to two things:

1. Incorrect performance due to mental slips (e.g. forgetting the next figure or finding oneself on the wrong foot) or to temporary lapses in skill (e.g. loss of balance).
2. Incorrect performance due to inaccurate or incomplete understanding (e.g. consistently making long turns in Rights & Lefts) or because the dancer has not yet developed a skill (e.g. a 2-beat pas de basque).

This work is concerned with mistakes of both types. The approach described is limited to social dancing (vs. demonstration teams, candidate class, etc.) and applies primarily to basic classes, in settings at least a week in duration. This approach has produced generally favorable results under those conditions. It has been tried very little in other contexts; there is weak evidence that it is less successful there.

## *Mistakes as problem*

The assumption that mistakes are bad is instilled from many sources. When we are first learning to dance, our teacher occasionally stops the dance to correct us or others when we go wrong. The dance could have continued, so it is clear that getting this right is more important than continuing to dance in the presence of errors.<sup>1</sup> If we make an unexpected mistake during figure practice, the teacher often deals with that before moving on. Again, avoiding that mistake must be more important than the rest of the teacher's lesson plan. If we get through a whole figure or dance without mistakes, the teacher praises us, and often that is the only comment made. When we dance with the more experienced dancers, they help us correct our mistakes by whispering to us, by gesturing where we should go, and by waiting for us when we should go first. They rarely speak otherwise during the dance, and rarely gesture to each other or adjust their timing. Again, we learn that mistakes are to be avoided even at the expense of polite silence, graceful movements and good timing. We find this as we dance under other teachers and in other groups, in classes and at parties, in different states, counties and countries. As we become more experienced, we pass the same lessons on to newer dancers who come to join us. When we study to become teachers, we find that mistakes (often called "faults" in this context) occupy a large part of our lessons, and when we take our examination we make sure to see several faults among our dancers, name them loudly enough for the examiners to hear, and proceed directly to correct them. By this point, avoiding faults is so deeply ingrained that it is hard even to notice that we do it, let alone imagine teaching or learning some other way.

This approach is understandable, and has been followed for decades. But it carries a cost. Since people do make mistakes, thinking they shouldn't makes them anxious. This anxiety impairs their learning (indeed, it makes further mistakes more likely). It also impairs their fun, making it less likely they will return, and less likely they will tell their friends to come. Fear of making mistakes inhibits those who would learn by trying things. It inhibits everyone's body language and tends to freeze their faces and turn their gazes inward. This further reduces the fun, with the costs mentioned above. Being corrected by other dancers frustrates and angers some, driving them away and turning them into negative ambassadors for SCD. Many students eventually learn to dance with passion and self-expression, but many never do. For those who do, fear of mistakes delays that stage, sometimes into the years where their bodies are incapable of what their spirits are finally willing to do. Finally, time spent getting the geography right is time not spent on carriage, body mechanics, music, getting to know each other, the acceptable range of improvisation, the historical and social context, and other aspects of our favorite art.

## *Approach*

In the next sections I treat only the 'mental slip' type of mistake. The 'misunderstanding' type is addressed later.

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1. Of course it is important to fix problems that would derail a figure/dance. In this note we consider non-fatal mistakes.

I looked for something that might achieve similar results at lower cost, or even different costs. The fact that I myself make plenty of mistakes suggested an approach. Specifically, I have noticed all of the following thoughts during my own dancing:

- What's the name of that tune?
  - My partner likes to move! Let's try a longer arm next time.
  - That lady sitting out — didn't she sit out the previous dance?
  - Shoot — the choreography is ignoring delicious subtleties in this tune.
  - Make sure I'm carrying my shoulders and arms the way the teacher said to.
  - What's the next figure?
  - That couple coming toward us seems uncertain. Better dance cleanly and well.
  - Is that the fiddle taking the melody now?
  - We were late on the transition from the end of the dance to the beginning last time. What would set that up to work better this time?
- ... and many others.

I am a good student: alert, musical, attentive to teacher, partner and others, and constructively motivated. Different thoughts have held different positions in that list at different times, but "what's the next figure" was rarely at the top.

From this viewpoint I began to see mistakes as just part of a healthy social dance. A first step, then, was to accept them. Acceptance, however, is more subtle (and difficult) than it sounds. When we accept something, we do *not*:

- Judge it as bad, but keep silent
- Try (unsuccessfully) to convince ourselves that it's actually ok
- Ignore it, or focus our attention somewhere else

One example of acceptance can be found in live theater. When something unexpected happens in a rehearsal — the door is locked, a vase falls over — the director is likely to shout "work with it!" and the actor is expected to make it a part of the scene. Another occurs in a building designer's approach to water. Water wants to flow downhill, is patient, and can enter the smallest holes. The way to fight that fact is to seal every opening. The way to accept it is to provide a path downhill and away from the building.

It is worth noting that people rarely talk about things they accept. People study why the sky is blue, or what shade it is, or whether the sea gets its color from the sky; but you rarely hear them state that the sky is blue.

So — in order to accept mistakes I shouldn't talk about mistakes, and I shouldn't ignore them. What can I do? I decided to focus on recovering from mistakes. After some study I devised a simple but effective plan for recovering from one's own mistake, and began using it explicitly.

- When teaching a new figure, I ask, "how would you recover if this goes awry?" and make the dancers tell me.
- When a clear mistake occurs, I shout "recover!" and watch what happens.
- Afterward, the class and I debrief. Recovering quickly and smoothly earns a (verbal) gold star. Recovering within 4 bars gets a silver, and recovering within 8 bars gets a bronze. If the recovery is poor, we discuss what would have made it go better.

- And I make mistakes in my own dancing, and model good recoveries.

I did this mostly in beginners-only classes. As the dancers gained skill at recovering from their mistakes, we noticed that the experienced dancers' typical ways of helping were intrusive, often disorienting or irritating to the beginners. So I devised a similar plan for helping someone else recover from their mistake, and began teaching that to experienced dancers. Here I discovered an elegant synergy. In a room with dancers of mixed experience I tell the experienced dancers, in the presence of the beginners, what they should and should not do when sorting out a mistake. Having heard that, the beginners feel permission to resist being treated rudely. And if unhelpful helping causes a figure to break, the beginners don't blame themselves (not as often, anyway).

## ***Results***

The results have varied with time and situation.

For the first year or so I changed what I did and said, but didn't fully shake my ingrained assumption that mistakes were bad. I said, in effect, "mistakes are going to happen; here's what to do about them," and saw faces that said, "oh, thank goodness" or "at last, a realistic teacher." I rate that a weak positive result: the dancers were worried about their mistakes just as much as before, but less worried about what I thought.

With time, though, I internalized these attitudes (and gained skill and repertoire), and the atmosphere in the room changed noticeably. People became willing to experiment, to ask questions, to launch into a dance after "too little" teaching, etc. "Do it again" became an opportunity to gain skill rather than an implicit criticism that the previous round was wrong. One person thanked me with, "you let us play with the movement!" and I got other comments that dancers (and musicians and observers) appreciated my "positive attitude."

Once at a week-long workshop, after one set won a gold medal for a terrific recovery, a dancer from the neighboring set complained "*we* want a gold medal." My unplanned, grinning response was "then you'll have to make a mistake." The dancer went away satisfied, confident that her set would make one, and determined to recover smoothly. It was a bizarre conversation, but I realized later that we had both accepted that mistakes are neither good nor bad, but rather inevitable; and that the important thing is what you do about them. The fact that I was able to bring her, in three days, to a point that it had taken me years to reach was due to two main factors. First, I had my attitude on straight: by this time I was completely comfortable with this approach. Second, this was an all-beginners class, so there was no one there to tell them that mistakes were bad.

At times I have guessed wrong about how much freedom to give dancers. I let a dance continue, hoping the dancers would recover; but at least one of them really wanted to stop and sort it out. Those dancers found that experience frustrating.

There have also been times when our experienced dancers have used a similarly light touch with a dancer who had a clear but incorrect notion of how the dance

went. The result was a smooth, happy, incorrect performance; and the dancer went away with his incorrect idea reinforced.<sup>2</sup>

Yet another time, three people walked in off the street into an experienced class. The dancers used the same light touch and techniques of skilled helping that I taught them, and I was able to use my planned program with little change. The visitors made plenty of mistakes, but neither they nor the experienced dancers decided there was a problem. They stayed the whole evening, left with smiles and thanks, and had no idea of what a rare and beautiful thing had just happened.

### *Incomplete/incorrect understanding*

The previous discussion has covered the 'mental slip' aspect of mistakes. A parallel approach applies to errors due to misunderstanding or lack of skill.

I take the attitude that learning a skill or a new subject always proceeds by repeated performance — with errors, but fewer and fewer of them. So this type of mistake too is part of the fabric of learning. The dancers and I want to reduce mistakes, but we can do that without the usual anxiety and incrimination.

My approach is a simple adaptation of the pattern taught in candidate class. The pattern is:

1. Have the dancers do a step/figure
2. See a fault
3. Identify it
4. Decide what would make it better
5. Tell the dancers to do that
6. Repeat from (1)

The adaptation is to do steps 2–4 without saying anything. Thus, rather than "You're stepping behind on beat 2 of your pas de basque. You shouldn't do that. Instead, put your free foot in third in *front*, like this" I say, "Put your free foot in third in front, like this."<sup>3</sup> I have genuine cheerfulness in my voice and face, because I genuinely believe that nothing is "wrong" — this is the normal way to learn a skill. I also change "try that again" to "do that again," avoiding the implication that the first attempt failed; and I make other small changes.

The difference in any one instance is small, but the cumulative effect of an evening in which dancers are repeatedly told how to dance, versus an evening in which they are repeatedly told they are wrong, is large. And again, if we can catch dancers from the beginning it is possible to never introduce the notion that what they do is bad or wrong. When people learn to dance that way, they have the same joy on their face and passion in their dancing that you can see in children's dancing. Once we train that out of them, they take many years to regain it, if they ever do. It is a service to the dancer, and to the whole dancing scene, not to lose it in the first place.

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2. I have not figured out what to do about this. For now I take solace in the adage that people take home only 10% of what they learn in class.

3. Sometimes the dancer is genuinely unaware of the difference between what she is doing and what is wanted. In those cases the teacher has to point out both ways, and this method does not work.

Finally, the modified pattern above encouraged me to omit steps 2-3 entirely:

1. Have the dancers do a step/figure
4. Decide what would make it better
5. Tell the dancers to do that
6. Repeat from (1)

This freed me to think more about upper-level aspects of dancing, and to ask that it be “taller” or “lighter” and to say, “that’s right; now make it look easy” or “match the dancer who is just joining you,” etc.

A synergy emerged between the ‘mental slip’ and ‘misunderstanding’ types of mistake. When a beginning class is comfortable with recoveries, there often comes a time when they get a medium-difficulty figure, like reel of three, on the first try. When that happens I say something like, “Unfortunately, that was perfect, so I’m nervous: I don’t know whether you really understand this figure or you just got lucky. I need to see you recover from a mistake before I can be confident that you have this.”

My “unfortunately” takes nothing away from their deserved pride at getting the figure right. And my clear assumption that there will be a mistake means that when one comes, their confidence is undimmed.

### *Summary*

There are costs associated with the practice of treating mistakes as high-priority problems. This paper presents some results of an experiment in treating mistakes as part of the fabric of learning a skill and of a healthy social dance. The practice depends crucially on the teacher’s attitude, and is not applicable in all circumstances; but when it works it has greatly reduced those ill effects.