Courtesy for RSCDS-SF branch members

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Introduction

Courtesy and manners are the oil in the gears of society. People need to work together, but they don't always share assumptions or motivations. Goodwill, expressed through good manners, helps us accommodate the mismatches and coast through the rough spots.

Historically, dance lessons were also lessons in manners. The ballroom was a place where women could expect men to act like gentlemen and men could expect women to act like ladies. That's less true today, but we do practice a historical dance form. Some ballroom manners we carry forward; others we leave behind and good riddance. In this note we encourage readers to think of the dance setting as a place to be mindful of manners, and consciously to practice those that apply in a modern context. We no longer worry about gentlemen in spurs, for example, but 18th Century dancing masters didn't have to worry about cellphones.

Who can be courteous to whom?

We all contribute to the dance scene in different ways, and it is natural for each of us to view the world through the role we're playing. But it helps to think of others and the roles they play, and to assume that everyone is doing their best to make the dancing work for everyone.

Teachers and Class Managers

The more smoothly a class works, the harder it is to appreciate the work done behind the scenes. When the hall is always open, when signups and money are completed by class time, when goodies appear on the table, when the hall is decorated for special occasions, appreciate that work. When the teacher is on time and cheerful, the lesson has a clear direction and structure, and the music is well-chosen, appreciate the behind-the-scenes work. When both those things happen year after year, appreciate it.

And talk to each other. If you're the teacher and have to miss but you find a substitute, tell the manager. If you're the manager and want a few minutes at the end of class, tell the teacher (and send a notification or reminder the day before :-). Solve class problems together. If the teacher is paid and the manager is not, talk about it. Understand why. Make sure everyone is okay with the choice.

Managers and Dancers

Here are some (edited) responses to a question about what managers do to make their event feel friendly and welcoming:

- Smile a lot! We try to make the signing in and paying procedure as painless as possible. One of us is always at the table; then we leave the sign-in sheet for any latecomers.
- Encourage everyone to wear nametags, and introduce any new dancers to the teachers and, if possible, others who will be in their class.
- Dance in with the beginner/basic class, especially to encourage newcomers, who can feel overwhelmed.[1]
- Being the "tea lady" was a good opportunity to visit and listen[2] to other dancers.
- The energy of happy, helpful, friendly, lets-all-enjoy-the-dance moments can make a big difference in how less-experienced dancers become more comfortable!
- One manager produces very user-friendly email newsletters. This also means the managers rarely have to take up class time.
- We aim to be welcoming and informative when needed, but make the running of the class as unobtrusive as possible.
- We encourage other dancers to help out in various ways, and make sure that we thank them.

Responses to a question about what dancers can do:

- It's nice when the dancers recognize that the managers are volunteers, giving up time to set up class, sacrificing warm-ups, doing things in the background that they don't see.
- It's great when dancers volunteer to help out without having to be badgered to participate, especially at monthly parties; and I always really appreciated the early birds who would just grab the tables and set them up without being asked at the regular class!
- Dancers who understand that it doesn't always work out quite as planned (whatever it may be - not enough change for that $50 bill, forgot the sign-in sheet, late because of traffic) and don't give managers a hard time are lovely to be with!

Teachers and Dancers

It's useful to think of an unwritten "contract" between teacher and dancers.

Teachers:
We expect dancers to behave a certain way, usually without making that explicit either to them or to ourselves. It's worth some time thinking explicitly about what you expect, and then asking yourself *why* dancers would choose to behave that way. After all, they're adults, the class is for their benefit, they're the ones paying, and they outnumber you.

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1. Anyone can do this, but it feels especially friendly from managers, since newcomers have already talked with them, so they are a friendly face. This response illustrates the generous spirit that class managers regularly exhibit.
2. The authors think this choice of verb is noteworthy. "Tea lady" is a metaphor for someone who does the chores behind the scenes (in the metaphorical kitchen).

Then think what dancers might expect of you. Respect their time: start and end on time, be prepared and be efficient. Arrive early enough to spot unexpected problems, and come up with a solution before the class starts. Respect the dancers' dignity: say please & thank you, and single people out for praise but not blame.

Dancers:
We expect the teacher to do certain things, usually without being explicit either to her or ourselves. It's worth reflecting on how widely your personal expectations are shared, which ones are important enough to ask for, also how realistic they are and how long you can wait to have them fulfilled. After that reflection, a talk with the teacher outside of class can be productive.

Think also what the teacher might want of you, and why. Arrive on time. During the teaching, be quiet and give your attention to the teacher even if you know how the dance/figure/step goes. Your example is more powerful than you may know. When helping other dancers, follow the method in Appendix A. When the teacher makes a mistake, correct him deferentially: ask a polite question, or speak privately later. Support (or at least don't undermine) the lesson verbally and nonverbally. Many of these actions are also courtesies to the other dancers.

A superb example from one individual in the branch: he turns to face the teacher, gives his full attention, and only talks to say positive things during the lesson. He can have strong questions/disagreements, but expresses them respectfully, and outside of class.

Teachers and Other Teachers

When co-teaching be clear beforehand that there is one teacher at a time. Support the lesson nonverbally (see Appendix A).

When it's your turn, refer positively to points made by your co-teacher. Save disagreements for the debriefing afterward.

When you're a dancer in someone else's class, support the lesson nonverbally, as above.

Dancers and Other Dancers

Nonverbal messages (eyes rolled, meaningful glances to other dancers, sagging shoulders) carry more weight than many of us realize [5], and whether we intend it or not, are often interpreted as criticism, particularly by inexperienced dancers. Verbal messages are less disruptive if they fit the thread of the lesson and keep the focus on the teacher. It's easy to think a single instance is unimportant, but they add together to create a pattern, and the pattern makes a strong impression.

So be sure everyone gets to dance, and in the long run that they get to dance with the good dancers. Sometimes this means stepping up and sometimes it means stepping back [6]. Dance joyfully with everyone and let the joy show.

Helping is a particularly touchy subject (pun intended). The simple act of helping can feel patronizing, and it comes at a time when the helpee is vulnerable and is likely to be confused. At these times, less is more. See Appendix A.

Teachers and Musicians

Musicians:
The teaching time can get boring, but your being quiet and attentive (not practicing or telling jokes) helps the dancers hear, and lends a further signal that the focus is on the lesson. If you're playing for a class, try to follow where the teacher is going and be ready with the tune (ideally, the proper part of the tune, played in a way that supports the teacher's point).

Teachers:
You can respect the musicians' time by being efficient. Ensure that you can see the musicians (and they can see you) and agree on how you'll work together. In a different vein, an unwritten protocol says that the band doesn't talk to the dancers. This means the band can't defend themselves, and that means it's your responsibility to assure that they never need to. Arrange it so they know what's wanted, clearly and in plenty of time. When things do go amiss, take responsibility.

Say "please" and "thank you," and use their names.

Some broader ideas

Everyone wants to think they are part of a welcoming community. However, we get only occasional reminders of what that entails for the group or the individual, yet we are constantly aware of what would be convenient for us. So the convenient usually wins.

It is often valuable and interesting to have a conversation, possibly at a class or managers or teachers meeting about how welcoming the things we do might appear to a newcomer, and what (often small or simple) things we might do to be more welcoming - a "sins of commission" and "sins of omission" discussion. Similarly, a few minutes of individual reflection on those topics can be fruitful. An opening question can be "if we really believed we were a welcoming group, what would we consistently do (or not do)?" A person can ask "if I really believed that, how would I act?"

What now?

Kind intentions are good, but with thought and discussion we can often find ways to act even more courteously, toward even more people. The authors offer this article in hopes of raising the level of courtesy in the branch. We encourage everyone to think of what they personally can do, and also to talk with their partners in their various roles, and across roles. We would be pleased to carry on the discussion with anyone interested.

References and further reading

1. Marshall Rosenberg, "Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life," PuddleDancer Press. ISBN 1-892005-03-4
2. Chris Ronald's column in the April 2013 "Scottish Country Dancer"
3. Geoffrey Selling's article, "Lessons from a Fortnight's Teaching in Japan" TACTalk Volume 37, No. 2, September 2012
4. Bruce's and Armin's Kaleidoscope talks: http://scdkaleidoscope1.strathspey.org/videos
5. James Borg states that human communication consists of 93% body language and paralinguistic cues, while only 7% consists of the words themselves. Borg, James, "Body Language: 7 Easy Lessons to Master the Silent Language." FT Press, 2010, ISBN 978-0-13-700260-3
6. Patri J. Pugliese, "Etiquette and Arithmetic," The Newport Dancers' Gazette Vol 5 No 2 August, 1998. http://vintagedancers.org/newport/n_98gaz_2.html

Appendix A

Bruce uses this as a handout in teachers' workshops: how to be a good student in someone else's class. But it's useful for anyone who's reached the level where they will frequently be helping the set recover from mistakes.

When You're Not the Teacher

You want to help, and people look to you for help, but the obvious things to do are distracting and sometimes disruptive. Even if you are only whispering to one person, you send a message that it is not important to listen to the teacher. What *can* you do?

1. Keep looking for ways to help. An efficient presentation by the teacher assumes the experienced dancers are helping, and helpful experienced dancers are part of a healthy social atmosphere.
2. Don't say anything.
3. Don't touch people except where the dance calls for it.

   Cutting out talking and touching seems to cut out everything, but it doesn't. Practice this, and you'll begin to discover a wide variety of ways to communicate. This communication will not only make you a good helper; it will also improve your dancing.
4. If mistakes happen, let them. If the method you chose didn't work this time, let it go, both physically and mentally. For example, suppose someone is headed for you, about to give left shoulder into a reel that you know begins with right shoulder. You catch their eye, give them a big smile, and angle your body slightly for a right shoulder pass. You may also do other things, but suppose none of it works, and the time comes when

this is going to be either a left shoulder reel or a collision. Shift your body around and make it a left shoulder reel. Just as important, shift your mind around and decide that a left shoulder reel is OK: it moves, it takes the right length of time, it leaves you all in the right place (though possibly with wrong momentum), it may produce some nice mirroring with your partner, etc. You can be planning how to get out of it gracefully, and you may be wondering how to make this work better next time, but don't let that interfere with your genuine enjoyment of the figure and the people in it. Teach that mistakes are no big deal by acting as though they are no big deal. There are many repetitions, there are other people helping, there are other dances tonight, and there will be other nights.

5. Dance well, enjoy yourself, and let it show. Your example teaches both choreography and style, and by dancing well (not stopping to "help," for example), you assure that the vacant spaces appear in the right places at the right times. Your genuine cheerfulness allays the beginner's fear that they are hindering your fun.

This is the 1-page version—there are subtleties, exceptions, problems and benefits that this doesn't mention. We talk about these in my teachers' courses, and I'm happy to discuss them with anyone who wants to.

Notes by Bruce Hamilton May, 1999