

Shoot for the Moon

Organizers' Roles in Shaping the Future of Traditional Dance

Danielle Boudreau and David Millstone

In this session, we will look at ways that organizers themselves can – and should – play a vital role in shaping a vibrant, active, and constantly-evolving dance community. Working both in small groups and as a whole, we will look at current trends in the dance scene, analyze the pros (and related cons) of each, and help participants plan new ways forward to shape the future directions of their scenes.

Introduction

Both in their introduction and throughout the workshop, Danielle and David focused on dance as an ever-evolving activity characterized by various trends. These trends include both shifts in the social dynamics of dance and technical changes in dance. The first list below shows trends that Danielle and David brainstormed to prepare for the workshop; the others were suggested by workshop participants. There is much overlap, but these lists provide an interesting snapshot of what a large group of dance organizers in 2015 perceive as recent trends in the world of traditional participatory dance.

Current trends in the traditional dance world include...

Danielle and David's list

- Increasing diversity of dancers
- Increasing fusion with other dance forms (especially blues, swing & tango)
- Increasing use of social media for dance promotion
- Increasing use of social media for dance discussion and “critique”
- Increasing number of callers collectives
- Increasing desire to make traditional dance a safe space for people of all identities & physical presentations
- Increasing intolerance of predatory dancing behavior
- Increased number of dances billed “for experienced dancers only” or as “challenging contras”
- More interest in contra medleys
- Increase in the number of basic figures encountered in an evening

Participants' list

- Aging dancers
- Desire to appeal to youth
- The pushback hey / ricochet hey — what started as embellishments are becoming figures
- Novelty dances
- More complexity in dances
- Techno contra
- Gender issues
- Equal English dances, instead of older ones that favor one couple
- Awareness of carbon footprint issues / interest in carpooling
- More videos being taken at dances
- Swapping with others as partners
- “Community dance” has become a separate category from the “regular dance”
- Lack of style and decreased interest in learning how to dance well
- Alternative English country dance

Trends, continued...

- Decrease in overall variety of dance formations, e.g., contras only, no squares
- Appearance of new square dance revival series
- Fragmentation of dance community into narrow specialties
- Plethora of new callers, mostly young
- Increase in number of new dances being composed
- Focused interest in waltzing
- Increased focus on partner swing as a key component of a dance
- Spreading interest in techno contras
- Increased expectation that callers will teach dances, rather than dancing; less emphasis on style
- Increase in the “whoosh” factor, booking ahead
- Increase in the number of touring bands and callers; professionalization of talent
- Youth or other new dancers wanting to dance just with others in their category
- The “whoosh factor” — people booking ahead and/or racing to find partners after a dance
- The disappearing community band
- More dance weekends
- Increased interest in making a dance a “safe space”
- Louder sound
- Less dancer connection on the floor
- Influences from different music
- Role swapping
- Cross-dance style (swing, blues, etc.)
- Increase in the number of contras in Becket formation
- Dancers showing up from different backgrounds — more international dancers
- Sexy dancing
- Awareness of problem dancers
- Rise of national/professional talent
- Increased use of social media social
- Increased costs, payment to talent
- Groovin’ tunes
- Rise of square dances as a separate activity

Participants then selected eight particular trends, and formed groups focused on each of these. Group members listed pros and cons of each of these particular trends, and sometimes considered possible actions that organizers might take.

Below are descriptions of the particular outcomes of this process. These specifics relate to what this one group of participants came up with. The lists of trends above, and the ideas we generated about them below may or may not apply to your situation. However, there were two important underlying messages of the workshop. The first was that every trend has both potential benefits and drawbacks. The other was that organizers ought to think deeply about the trends they observe, because organizers often have an enormous influence on their communities. By taking an active role they can have a very positive effect on future trends.

Ideas that emerged from the small groups

Aging dancers trying to attract youth

Positives about involvement of older dancers

- Dance longevity/preserving of tradition
- Bring experience of various kinds, including dancing, running dances, and problem solving
- May have more time

But...

- Ultimately groups will fizzle if there are not younger dancers to renew them
- Sometimes difficulty adapting to change

Positives about involvement of younger dancers

- Invigorate a community
- Offer hope for the future
- Bring new leadership

But...

- May lack awareness or appreciation of tradition(s)

Possible actions for creating connections between aging and younger dancers include developing mentorship opportunities, encouraging interaction off the dance floor as well, promoting more family/community dancing, publicizing dance in venues frequented by youth, and hiring a mix older and younger performers.

Increasingly complex choreography: Rise in embellishments as “part of the dance”

Pros:

- Learning new things
- Fun/exciting
- Dance is evolving
- Experience the music in a different way
- Adds to partner interaction
- Attracts new dancers
- Different physicality, neat revelations
- Opportunity for unique role-swapping (if we include gender-swapping as an “ornament”)
- Callers’ chance to adapt dances to local needs

Cons:

- Pressure on dancers who do not feel they know how to do flourishes
- Individual might not feel comfortable asking someone to dance who is seen as liking lots of flourishes
- People trying flourishes without proper technique (poor timing, risk of injury)
- Can detract from sense of partner connection
- Can disrupt dance
- Can overwhelm/disrupt new dancers
- Feeling uncomfortable
- Loss of tradition in a “traditional dance” event
- Callers needing to adapt

Loss of community bands

Pros:

- Gets community involved
- Strengthens community: local musicians bring in friends and family
- With leadership, can improve musicianship in a community

Cons:

- Unpredictable quality
- Unpredictable quantity (band size/makeup)
- May not draw in people from neighboring communities

Influx of new dancers from recent immigrant communities

Pros:

- Increased caller skills
- Increased diversity of dancers
- More dancers means more money
- Contributes to community/national integration
- Social interaction between sub-cultures leading to better mutual understanding

Cons:

- Language barrier
- Experienced dancers may hesitate to engage because of added barriers
- Language barriers and cultural assumptions could reduce volunteerism

More role swapping and gender-neutral dances

Pros:

- More openness and inclusiveness
- May help make for better dancing
- Adds complexity and “spice”

Cons:

- Can make the balance of leaders/followers less balanced
- May confuse other dancers, especially newer ones

Possible actions related to the trend toward more gender role swapping include a suggestion to wait until after the break for the benefit of new dancers who are learning one role, designating a particular dance during an evening as a good one to try swapping roles, and learning different holds for the swing, such as crossed hands, that are more gender neutral.

More videos being taken at dances

Pros:

- Helpful for callers learning dances
- Tool to introduce new people to dance
- Good promotion for dance websites
- Helpful for dancers learning particular moves or flourishes
- Captures the excitement of the dance
- Preserves information about dances and dance style for the future

Cons:

- Poor quality video can leave a bad impression
- Potential for loss of cultural context: seeing the dance without being there (spectating vs. participating)
- Privacy and permissions
- It can be intimidating to be videoed; changes the focus/awareness of the dancers.

Possible actions related videotaping of creation of guidelines and norms for informal videotaping, communicating these to the dancers on a regular basis, and creation of some “official” video footage for posting online to promote the dance.

More dance weekends and double dances

Pros:

- Offers venue for higher skills workshops
- Complex dances
- Convenes broader dance community
- Attracts national bands and callers
- Improves local dance skills

Cons:

- Competition for weekends (choices) and bands and callers
- May be financially challenging or exclusive
- Does not convene local dance community
- Attracts problem dancers (very focused on flourishes, or overtly sexual dancing)
- Higher carbon footprint

The growing importance of addressing the carbon footprint of contra dancing

This group focused on ideas for reducing the carbon footprint of our dances, rather than focusing on whether or not the trend toward greater awareness was a positive one or not. (It seems self-evident that greater awareness is positive.) Ideas included:

- Develop systems for carpooling to dances and dance events, including public recognition for people who make this happen
- Reduce waste at events
- Increase awareness of heating/lighting at the dance hall, and make responsible decisions about these
- Encourage vegetarian and vegan food for snacks and meals
- Dedicate a part of budgets to carbon offset