

Dance for College Credit!

by Hilton Baxter

There are several colleges which have (or are near) vibrant contra and/or English dance communities. But few offer a course for credit which focuses on these dance traditions. Starting with the Fall 2016 semester, I have been teaching just such a class at Penn State Harrisburg. It's a three-credit course in the School of Humanities, and it includes academic requirements, as well as ample opportunities for students to try the dances themselves.

Penn State University has 24 campuses. The largest is in State College, in the geographic center of Pennsylvania. The second largest campus is near Harrisburg (also the capital of the Commonwealth). It has a strong American Studies program, which is a good fit for a class focusing on contradance, English country dance and related traditions. The course is called Dance Appreciation and satisfies some general education requirements.

Creating a course

After I proposed the course and it was approved, I had to plan what the students should learn. I got ideas and suggestions from David Millstone; Susan Kevra; Pat MacPherson, Director of Education at CDSS; colleagues in the School of Humanities, and Heidi Abbey Moyer, Humanities Reference Librarian, at Penn State Harrisburg.

I wanted students to dance and to fall in love with the dances. But for a three-credit course, we would need to go deeper. With help from those folks just mentioned, I found several books and other materials, which had chapters or sections that would work in place of a textbook. I put these on reserve in the campus library for student use.

Academic goals

I came up with these course objectives:

- become capable of doing a variety of country dances with roots in England, Scotland, Ireland and related traditions,
- analyze and intelligently discuss historical and cultural contexts of certain dances,
- recognize significant musical styles and influences related to particular dances,
- relate certain literary works with particular dances,
- think creatively and express ideas clearly in discussions, activities, and writing.

Dancing goals

I had to assume that the students knew nothing about any of these dances. So the first class meeting included video examples of English dance (from the 2005 film of "Pride and Prejudice") and of contradance. And we did the standard introductory lesson I use for contra, and part of the introductory lesson I use for English country dancing.

We wouldn't be able to explore all the academic disciplines that relate to these traditions: history, geography, folklore, sociology, music, literature, education, certainly others. So the early sessions focused on historical background while learning the basics of English dance, contradance and squares. We talked about Jane Austen and literature. Students learned that rapper is a sword dance (different from rapping). We even touched on mathematical aspects of progression. I invited a local Scottish dance group to visit the class for a demo, and to teach a couple of dances. Finally, students did independent projects, connecting dance to other subjects that interested them.

Every class period we did several dances, usually chosen to illustrate a theme or topic. For example, one session focused on history, starting with Abbots Bromley Horn Dance. That evening we danced examples from each century starting with Upon a Summer's Day from John Playford's first edition of *The Dancing Master* (1651). We did a dance from around 1750, and a Civil War dance from around 1850. We got as far as Dud's Reel (1950s) during that class.

Another week the theme included modern contradances and English dances. One class meeting was a condensed lesson in music appreciation, and another session introduced longsword, rapper and morris dances (unfortunately, we didn't have the time or equipment to do any of the dances ourselves).

As the semester progressed, we did a couple of chestnuts, some triple-minor dances, and some modern creations (including some that appeared in Hollywood movies).

Challenges

None of the students had done contras or English before. Some had never danced before at all. A few had vague memories of square dance from earlier schooling. Several were non-native speakers of English, so language was sometimes an issue.

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As an evening class, meeting for three hours once a week, students were sometimes tired, hungry or both. Gender balance was a factor. I emphasized the roles rather than the gender, and most students became comfortable in both roles.

Initially, students did elbow swings or two-hand turns, which resulted in occasional mis-orientation at the end of swings. And it took a few weeks for them to remember terms and figures from one session to the next.

We were not able to have live music during classes, unfortunately, but I used recordings of excellent bands, which was reasonably successful. At first, students struggled to dance at full speed, so I used a wonderful computer program, *Amazing Slow Downer*, to adjust the speed (without changing the pitch of the music).

Caller or professor?

I felt a tension between my role as a professor and my instincts as a caller. At a regular dance, or a one-night-stand, my goal is for everyone to have fun and do dances with just the right amount of challenge, interesting even if easy. I usually do just one walk-through, or sometimes no walk-through. But as a professor, there was material to cover, and sometimes this meant more time teaching a dance than I would take in a public event.

And how to decide who deserves an A, and who should get a B? It was fairly easy to evaluate students on their knowledge of dance history, what to do while waiting out, etc. The syllabus said they would not be graded on the quality of their dancing, but what should they be graded on?

Attendance and participation was, and is, the largest single component of the final grade. Other criteria are still evolving.

Incidentally, I had hoped that students would attend a public contradance or English dance during the semester, so they could experience the fun and energy of such a gathering firsthand. Unfortunately, university policy requires that transportation be provided to any required off-campus activity. This

was not within the departmental budget, so I offered extra credit to anyone who attended such an event. However, only two students took advantage of the opportunity—they loved it, and were sorry not to have gone sooner.

What's next?

It's not clear if any of the students who took the class in Fall 2016, will become avid contra dancers, English dancers, morris or sword enthusiasts. But they now know these traditions exist, and are, as several students said, "a great way to be social with other people." A good sign is that the class is happening again in Spring 2017 and is at full capacity.

Personally, I have gained a richer understanding of our dance traditions and current creative trends. I've been able to call dances that aren't often done in typical communities these days. Most important, it's clear that our dances and music can excite and inspire anyone who tries them. I'm teaching the course again as you read this, and the future is bright.

Hilton Baxter began calling in 1999 and has participated in caller workshops led by Cis Hinkle, John Krumm and Lisa Greenleaf, as well as many of the CNY Caller Gatherings in upstate NY (see Michael Kernan's "Continuing Education for Callers," CDSS News, Fall, 2016). He loves to call contra, English and squares, for all experience levels, for small groups and huge crowds.



photo: Hilton Baxter

The passion of human beings gathering together, whether to dance, play music, or sing is powerful. Embrace the power.
Dance. Play. Sing.