

## **Country Dancing as a College Course**

***by Brooke Friendly***

I admit one of the reasons I started a country dance class at Southern Oregon University (SOU) was selfish. Certainly some of my goals were more lofty: introducing the form to a new generation, building potential dancers for our community dances, and, as a CDSS Youth Task Group member and former Board member, contributing in some measure to the CDSS youth initiative. However, one of my prime motivations was for the fun and challenge of doing something different.

Dancing on a college campus can take many forms: club, extracurricular activity or academic course. Because of the size and structure of SOU and its location in the small town of Ashland, I chose an academic course. SOU has a continuing education unit, which makes it relatively easy to get a course approved outside the standard curriculum. It also has an outstanding theatre department, with many students interested in various forms of movement. The student population is diverse in age, having many “nontraditional” students in their late twenties and older. As someone who started dancing in the early 1980s and not being a student, forming a club was not a good option.

To get an academic course approved at a university you generally need several elements: a course proposal, a course syllabus and a teaching resume. Each college/university may have its own required format for a course proposal, but in general you need a course description, course objectives or outcomes, and clear method of assessing student learning (how you will determine their grade). It needs to have something more than simply dancing for fun.

These are the course outcomes/objectives on my course proposal: Students will learn footwork, styling, figures, progressions and specific dances in both English country dance (ECD) and Scottish country dance (SCD) repertoire. Students will gain a sense of the music, social aspects, history and contemporary expression of these dance forms.

The course proposal and syllabus have much of the same basic information but are geared towards different audiences and are therefore written differently—a bit more formally and in third person for the course proposal; less formal, more detail and directly to students for the syllabus.

This is a sample of grading policy from my syllabus:

Your grade will be based on the following:

- Attendance: each absence will result in the lowering of your grade by one-third of a grade
- Commitment to the class, exemplified by concentration and focus as well as being

on time to class

- Movement skills (footwork, use of hands and arms, body awareness, styling for ECD versus SCD)
- Figure skills (remembering terminology, ability to execute dance figures)
- Rhythmic skills (ability to maintain rhythm/timing, basic understanding of the variety of tunes)
- Social dance skill
- Improvement of movement, figure, rhythmic and social dance skills over the course of the term
- Journal, glossary notes and response to any assigned readings, web or film research

Evaluation will take place during observation throughout the course and at the final presentation. Through small group presentations of dances for four to eight dancers, you will demonstrate competency in material learned during the course, including basic English, and Scottish styling, footwork and figures. Through a “dance party” of familiar and easy, new dances, you will demonstrate experience in the social nature of this dance form.

For the resume, you need to include appropriately worded education and experience to demonstrate that even though you may not have a terminal degree (e.g. MFA in dance, PhD in dance history), you have sufficient qualifications to teach that will stand up to an accreditation visit.

The other piece to getting a course approved is going to the right place on campus. This is not necessarily the PE, theatre or even dance department (if there is one). If the university has a continuing education or lifelong learning unit, that is a good place to start. Often, public universities will have state allocation for core curriculum and anything new, different or taught by an adjunct faculty member, must be approved and run through such a unit.

One of the fun things about teaching a dance course for academic credit is that you can assign homework and require different kinds of student participation. The type of homework and participation will depend on how many academic credits the course is worth and how much focus is on dance versus other elements. For example, you may choose to have them write a research paper on an aspect of dance history.

Since one of my goals in teaching the class was to get the students exposed to more dance forms and potentially involved in community dance, I chose not to go with a research paper. Instead, I require a “show and tell” project, a journal, several small homework assignments and “field research.” The show and tell can be anything the student wants to do as long as it related to country dance in some way. Some (often theatre majors) have brought in

photographs, drawings or actual costumes they had made of period attire. Others who played an instrument have given short concerts of country dance tunes. (Unfortunately nobody to date has been able to play up to dance tempo—some day we may have some live music.) Some did web research or shared copies of Sharp's *Country Dance Manual* from the library. One of my favorites was a dimensional collage of drawings, photos from the web, sheet music of tunes to dances we had learned—it's still hanging on my refrigerator.

For homework assignments, I give them a write up and sheet music for a dance done in class and ask them to diagram the figures and show how the words matched the music. I got back an amazing variety of types of diagrams, from little people to circles and scribbles. Some students knew nothing about music so getting them to listen to music and look at the page, compare that to moving to the music and then match words, diagrams, physical memory to the sounds and sheet music, was very fun. The field research was simply that the students had to attend at least one social dance in the community (my ECD/SCD weekly dance, the Ashland Folk Music Club monthly contra dance or an event outside the region). We now have a couple of regulars at my dance and at the local contra dance. Two came to our spring ball and one is a CDSS youth scholarship recipient who attended the Bay Area Country Dance Society's English Dance and Music Week in Mendocino.

Teaching an academic course makes a refreshing change from leading a community dance. One is that you can expect more from the dancers—they are getting a grade. You can add some other elements—more history, the connection between the music and the dance, quotes from literature, reconstruction and so forth. You can play with different methods of teaching.

For example, the class after we cover heys for three, I have them get in groups and re-teach each other to help them remember and internalize the figure. Toward the end of the course I am able to give them a write up and sheet music to an easy dance they don't know, play them the music, put them in small groups and have them figure out the dance, show it to the other groups, and all dance it together. It's a real kick to watch how much fun they have collaborating on a dance.

One of the great pleasures of teaching country dance on a college/university campus is seeing the growth and "aha" moments, exemplified by this quote from a student's journal, "Wow! I got it! I never thought I would figure out progressions. What joy to move to this music."

Download a sample [course proposal](#) and [syllabus](#) from the CDSS website.

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