

“Just dance and love what you’re doing”— Contra Dancing at UO

by Miranda Arana, with quotes from her students

Contra dance is a joyful expression of community, and most of the members in this community seem to have a common desire to welcome newcomers and share what we do with others. We love to see new dancers discover the joys of the dance, to see the inevitable smiles on their faces and their delight as they discover how satisfying it is to be part of the group as it flows almost magically from one dance figure to the next.

“Contra dance made me feel good about myself. Who said I couldn’t dance? It was so much fun... [You] feel a sense of friendship with everyone in the room. It just shows that the best way to learn or gain experience is by doing it. As the quote goes ‘tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I will understand.’”

Being a university professor, I have had a unique opportunity to introduce contra dance to hundreds of reluctant candidates: my students. What began as a whimsical idea has become one of the most richly rewarding experiences I have had as a teacher and contra dance enthusiast.

“At the end of the night, I found myself feeling like there was nothing else I could have done that evening that was more fun, healthy and interactive as this event.”

I teach a course entitled “Introduction to World Music” at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, designed for non-music majors (engineers, architects, molecular biologists, finance majors, etc.) to fulfill their upper division, non-Western civilization requirement. Many have confessed that they selected my course thinking they could sit back in class, listen to a bunch of boring music, and come out at the semester’s end with three credits and little more.

“I would never have voluntarily said ‘sure I’ll go to a contra dance,’ but I plan to attend another one just for fun... I learned so much about this culture, the amazingly nice people that attend (especially the regular dancers, very helpful), and myself. I now am determined to ignore any reluctance to put myself out there and enjoy the experiences life has to offer. All it took was a required paper, an excellent teacher, and the opening of my eyes.”

I am dedicated to providing something more meaningful and long lasting. While the traditional academic approach, textbooks and lectures, certainly has a place in class, my biggest success has been to involve my students in hands-on experiences. We play West African drums, put on Indonesian-style shadow puppet plays, clap out South Indian rhythmic cycles, and what better way to put music into a body than to make that body move to the music?

“It was refreshing to attend the contra dance to engage with people face to face, and even more intimately by touch! Dancing by touching palms or swinging in a circle holding hands was so much more satisfying, because it got me moving and interacting with other human beings. I love that anyone can dance, whether you’re twenty or one hundred and twenty years old!”

While my students seem to enjoy learning the basics of contra dance during class time, I have discovered that they will not out of their own volition go to a local evening dance, even when offered extra credit or the forgiveness of an unexcused absence. I have found that the best way, practically the only way, to reliably get my students to a contra dance is to require their attendance, participation and a subsequent three-page paper. This is why I call them “reluctant” candidates for contra dance. As a whole, they cringe at the thought of attending an old fashioned dance they’ve never heard of, to dance with people (strangers!) who may be at least twice their age, to music that has no DJ, in a venue that serves no alcohol. And when I tell them to look into their partner’s eyes to avoid getting dizzy, they practically crawl under their desks, filled with embarrassment and dread.

“An online article about contra dance said that beginners should try to dance with a more experienced dancer, even if it is someone they don’t know. When I read this, I thought, ‘There is no way I am going to dance with a random stranger!’ However after having done so, I would say that it is much more fun to dance with a person who actually knows what they are doing, even if we have never met before.”

My own introduction to contra dance came when I was invited by a musician friend to play for an Oklahoma City dance in 2006. At the time, the Scissortail Traditional Dance Society sponsored regular dances in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. Playing for dances became one of my favorite things to do as a musician—the enthusiasm of the dance community was instantly gratifying, more so than playing for a seated, passive audience. And this led to my learning how to dance, for it is said that musicians perform better when they actually know how to dance.

“I was a complete stranger to just about everyone in that room, and yet never once did I feel like one. Everyone knew what they were there to do, and there was nothing more to be done than to take the hand of a stranger and dive into the unknown. My contra dance experience was incredibly and surprisingly enjoyable...”

Meanwhile, back at the university, I was doing everything in my power to give my students meaningful experiences with music. I noticed that they responded quite well to my assortment of guest presenters, who occasionally would get the whole class up and out of their chairs to try basic dance movements from Afro-Cuban and Native American traditions.

“I walked into the building with a negative attitude about wasting my time doing an outside-of-class assignment, and by the time I left I felt completely different. Meeting new people and being able to laugh and dance with the group allowed me to broaden my horizons and experience new things. The process of breaking out of my comfort zone was a facet that will make the contra dance assignment stand out in my college experience.”

Everything came together two years ago when I decided to turn one of my concert report assignments into a contra dance assignment. To prepare the students, I taught them some of the basic moves in class, and showed videos posted on YouTube of crowded dance floors at big dance weekends. We watched Perpetual e-Motion in action making seasoned dancers hoot and holler. We watched Wild Asparagus rock the house. I provided my students with a calendar listing of Oklahoma City dances, and told them they were to attend at least two hours of any dance event that fit their schedules over the course of the semester. They were to participate in at least three called dances, and turn their paper in within a week of the dance they attended.

“...the best part of the experience was how welcoming the contra dance community was to

everybody in attendance. I can't help but think to myself how much better the world would be if everyone displayed such warmth and hospitality towards strangers!”

It wasn't until their papers started rolling in that I realized the power of this assignment. The quotes in this article are from their various papers and are representative of almost every contra dance report I have read. The collective joy expressed deserves to be shared with the larger dance community. Because of the abundance of genuinely heartwarming papers, I eagerly look forward to reading my students' papers.

“After a few dances, I finally began to keep eye contact with my partners, and once this happened my partners began to open up. They taught me how to do fancy turns out of promenades, and suggested things that would make me a better dance partner. It is now clear that the full contra dance experience cannot be had until you are able to hold eye contact.”

The Oklahoma City dance community has been tremendously gracious in welcoming students from my classes. The experience has been mutually rewarding; as newcomers are nurtured by seasoned dancers, they bring with them a youthful energy and excitement. Intergenerational socializing seems to be a rarity in the United States these days, and to see it work so well in the contra dance context is a beautiful thing.

“My mind was closed coming into it but opened as I was exposed to the dances. The joy and cheer on everyone's face was priceless and eye opening. It was fun and lively and innocent and genuine, with a sober yet flirtatious atmosphere...far from other experiences I have had in recent memory, and I am thankful that my participation is a requirement of this course, for I may not have ever done so if it were not.”

After one semester of sending my students to the Oklahoma City dance, it seemed to be the right time to start a regular dance here in Norman. I teamed up with Sandy Knudson, a local caller/music teacher, and Kristin Collier, an OU student with a passion for contra dance. We chose affordable space at a church within walking distance from the campus.

“I hope this assignment can be spread to all of the World Music classes so that the contra dance community can grow within Norman. It provides such different exposure than what college kids are used to... I will be looking for contra communities wherever I move after graduation.”

With the support of the Scissortail TDS, we held our first Norman dance in September 2011. Together with my students and regular dancers from the greater Oklahoma City area, we have consistently had fifty to sixty people at each monthly dance. Inspired by its success, I am now in the process of working with a volunteer group of OU student musicians who have begun to play at the Norman dances.

“As I have grown older, being shy has become easier to handle, though it still affects aspects of my life. If it had not been for this assignment, I would have missed all the fun. I felt like I had found the community I had been looking for since moving to school three years ago.”

Not all of my students are repeat attendees, but those who do come back tend to bring friends, and the community is growing. We had enough students to hold two flash mob contras with live music on campus. Both are now viewable on YouTube and at www.scissortail.org (http://www.scissortail.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=57&Itemid=161); one was covered in the OU daily newspaper.

“I never met one person that I didn’t want to talk more with nor did I do a dance that I wouldn’t do again. I think this speaks volumes about the contra dance community. I never expected that...newcomers, would be so...encouraged to be a part of the community... I love that contra dancing is not about how experienced or amazing you are, but about how much fun you have dancing and doing it with caring, fun-loving people. ...One day, it would be exciting to be the contra dance expert and get to teach a newbie the moves and give someone else the joy that the contra dance community gave to me.”

Inspired by the success of this project, I continue to look for ways to support the growth of the contra dance community on campus. My next move will be to contact the Center for Student Life and International Student Services [which] look for ways to engage the student body in healthy social and cultural activities, and they strive to build bridges between the student body and the wider Norman community. With their support, we might be able to attract new students to dances without making it a course requirement.

“Watching videos and learning the dances in class is completely different from interacting with the community and hearing the live music. The energy of the fellow contra dancers was contagious. The energy of the band is feeding you, and the energy of the dancers is feeding the band.”

Universities are an ideal location for promoting contra dancing, and can fit into a course’s curriculum in a myriad of ways, depending on the course subject. Louise Siddons, professor of Art History at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, has been successful incorporating dance into her nineteenth century American art class; students learned the English dance Hole in the Wall to understand colonial architecture, fashion, social etiquette and cultural values (see her article in *CDSS News*, issue 207, March/April 2009). While she hasn’t made attendance at a local dance part of her course requirement, her own monthly contra dance at OSU in Stillwater has attracted varying numbers of students and faculty in addition to the regular attendees coming from the Oklahoma City dance community.

“Although it took some courage to jump into a community of dancers we didn’t know, it was well worth the effort. The caller and band remained jovial and friendly throughout the entire evening—they and the regular dancers exhibited constant patience with the many new learners at the dance. Thus is the nature of contra: happiness and civility in dancing and music to bring a deep-rooted cultural tradition into a community, making the community stronger in the process. The interactions among the band were often humorous—whether nodding to each other or calling out shouts during the music—because they were so in tune (no pun intended) with what they were doing and so enjoying what they were doing. The art of contra is really very easy; it is just to dance and to love what you are doing while you are doing it.”

It is my hope that this article will serve to inspire other university-affiliated dance organizers across the nation to share their successes, strategies and experiences, and to inspire professors of various disciplines to employ contra dance as a means of teaching their subjects while building community. Dance floors across the nation should be filled with young people, learning, smiling and participating in the beautiful celebration that contra dance can be.



Miranda Arana grew up in Western New York. She moved to Oklahoma in 1999 after earning a master’s degree in Ethnomusicology from Wesleyan University where she fell in love with contra dancing. She’s part of the local music scene, playing flute in whatever Latin, Middle Eastern, and Irish music ensembles she can find.