



Training New Contra Callers in Portland, ME

by Dugan Murphy

“I guess I tried it on a dare.” “I read everything I could find online and found the nearest open calling venue.” “I was curious, but had no idea how to learn until I was approached by another caller.”

If you ask a roomful of contra dance callers how they learned the trade, each one will likely tell you a pretty different story. In Portland, ME, I’ve had success raising new contra callers using a training format I developed in the early part of 2016. Below is an overview of how my program works and the impact it has had in my region.

Need for Training and Benefit of a Class Format

In the early part of 2016, Dela Taylor and I started planning what became Portland Intown Contra Dance, Maine’s first weekly contra dance series. When we did, we realized that there were too few callers in the local area to support the frequency of dances we had planned. Furthermore, we couldn’t find any opportunities locally for interested dancers to get introduced to calling and to get practice.

Before I decided to design and offer a class, I tried informally meeting with friends I thought might make good callers. What I found was that too few of them ended up showing interest and/or proficiency. I also realized I had committed to repeating myself with each person I chose to mentor. When I designed a

class and promoted registration to anyone interested in attending, people came to me whom I never would have thought to ask. I found an opportunity to reach more potential callers while making better use of their time and mine.

I am finding success in first grounding students in best practices, then getting them practicing as soon as possible. I want my students to form what I consider good habits from the beginning of their training and to enjoy success as much as possible. I believe that maximizing successful experiences when calling for live crowds is important for maintaining student confidence in their own ability and maintaining student rapport with dancers. This rapport is crucial for cultivating forgiveness of mistakes among dancers as well as their willingness to attend dances called mostly by students.

Here’s a very very short outline for the five-hour class I call “Calling 101.” You can view the full version at <http://www.duganmurphy.com/playshops> if you’d like to know more.

- Introduction and overview of the caller’s various responsibilities
- Analysis of the structure of tunes fit for contra dance: audio and visual
- Analysis of contra dance choreography as it fits with tunes
- Participatory intro to prompting figures with music

- Discussion of teaching a walk-through: word choice, order of words, and teaching points
- Dance cards: comparison of styles and practice making your own
- Practice sessions: each student teaches a walk through, calls a dance to recorded music as the others dance, and then receives feedback from the group
- Post-practice discussion and wrap-up

I typically host the class from 10 am to 3 pm with a break for lunch at noon between making dance cards and the start of the practice sessions. I limit registration to nine students so that during the practice sessions, there is one caller and eight dancers to make two minor sets. I act as the band by controlling the recorded music. After the class, I email each student a list of digital resources, including recommended contra dance choreography and texts on best practices for callers, perhaps most important of which being Cary Ravitz's notes on calling contra dances. You can view these documents and links at <http://www.duganmurphy.com/playsshops>.

Training After the Class

Students who show proficiency in the class are invited to call one dance at a Thursday night PICD event as a guest caller. If the student experiences more-or-less total success in calling the one dance, I invite them back on a future date to call the second half of an evening. If the student does not experience total success, I invite them to repeat the guest slot at a future date. If the student experiences total success in calling half the evening, I invite them to call a full evening at their next gig. If not, I invite the student to repeat a half night of calling. Once the student calls a full evening without needing my assistance, I consider the student "graduated," carrying my recommendation to other dance organizers.

I help students prepare for their live calling experiences by helping them pick out dances appropriate for their skill level and for the expected dancers. In advance of their gig, we meet for a "rehearsal," at which time I review their plan for a walk-through, review their ability to prompt the dance with music, and make recommendations for refining both. I also discuss with the student at that time how they will work with the band. The night of the gig, I am physically present with the student on stage to help them recover from mistakes and to remind them of things they may forget about.

When I book a student to call the second half of the evening, I most often call the first half myself, since the first few dances can be a little more challenging

for the caller. In this case, I may also book another, less experienced student to call one dance as a guest late in the first half, making a total of three callers in one evening.

The guided preparation before each student gig and my presence with the student on stage is important for ensuring the highest possible likelihood of a successful calling experience for the student. Helping the students to be successful increases the proportion of student callers versus experienced callers I am able to book at the dance series without compromising the quality of dancer experience.

After calling for a live crowd, some students may lose interest. Others who don't work well with my mentoring style may seek calling opportunities outside Portland.

Results So Far

So far, I have hosted 35 students in four classes in my home in Portland, most of them from the immediate area, but many of them coming from coastal New Hampshire, Central Maine, Boston, and Western Massachusetts. Of those 35, 19 have called from the stage or are scheduled to call soon. Of the first 30 weekly events at Portland Intown Contra Dance, 18 of those events had one or two student callers performing. Four of the 19 emerging callers have been booked for full evenings on their own without me. I've also hosted a class for eight in Toronto and a class for four in Brooklyn, New York and at least two of the participants from the Toronto class have since called whole evenings on their own.

Training Callers Yourself

Get in touch if you want to know more about my class and training method so you can help grow more callers in your community. There are many other models to choose from as well, including the CDSS Contra Dance Callers Course at Pinewoods led by Lisa Greenleaf (not held in 2017); the Mad Robin Callers Collective in Burlington, VT; and Bob Isaacs's 13-week course in NJ, to name a few.

And if you are ever in Portland on a Thursday night, come dance with us at the State Street Church!

Dugan Murphy is a contra dance caller, co-organizer of PICD, humorist and storyteller, voice artist, and nonprofit consultant from Portland, ME, but he's particularly excited about getting married to his fiancée, Dela Taylor, this summer.