

A dance is like a conversation

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Non-dancing friends often ask me if dancing isn't anachronistic, in that men are always leading, asking the follower for a dance. My answer uses a metaphor that I've heard a couple of times: A dance is like a conversation. Interestingly, this metaphor can be taken quite far. There are many parallels. It is the way I like to think about dancing even if it may not be the standard approach. In the following paper I want to discuss those aspects focussing on the parallels in leading / following and how to put them into dancing. I will focus on lindy hop since it is the partner dance I mostly do :) and I'll address the leader as 'he' and the follower as 'she'. It's just a simplification, the same statements would apply if I address leaders and followers vice versa or if both are male or female.

A conversation isn't just there. It doesn't fall out of the sky and you start talking. So the conversation needs to be started. Someone needs to ask for a dance. I've almost never run into the situation in daily life that only men start conversations, so why should it be different in dancing? Anyone can start the conversation. To have a conversation you need a language in which you can talk. Technique would be the equivalent in dancing. There are a lot of techniques including some that just don't work together, which is not to say that one is better than the other. Once the language is chosen you'll need a topic to talk about. The topic often happens to be the music. Of course it can also be set by the leader or the follower.

We haven't yet started talking, which is considered helpful for a conversation. Let's start out with basics. Leading is talking and following is listening. Leaders, be aware that unclear leading is like mumbling. Your partner doesn't understand you and probably will be annoyed trying to decipher what you want to say.

Clear communication in one direction is very basic. Usually conversations are much more complicated and so is dancing. A one-sided conversation, in which the leader talks and talks and just won't stop, is boring for the follower. An aspect that is often overlooked is that the leader probably doesn't even want to talk all the time. He'll feel like an entertainer. This is the point where leading and following starts to get interesting because the follower has to learn how to talk.

There are various ways in which a follower can talk. One way for followers to contribute is through stylings. Another, a somewhat more aggressive way would be simply taking over the lead, completely or just for a couple of beats. (Some leaders might be confused or dislike having someone interfere in their leading; if you don't know in advance you'll need to try it out.) Taking over the lead might also be a good way to get the leader's attention if your leader just won't be quiet. Sometimes talking is a smile or an extra turn that wasn't lead.

You have plenty of options here, followers; go and explore them. Finding new ones is very satisfying.

So now that the followers know how to talk we have a problem - we might have two people talking at the same time. Experience will tell you that this doesn't work. So leaders have to learn how to be quiet and to listen. How to be quiet as a leader? It isn't easy, especially since you were probably taught to lead all the time; maybe the follower even expects you to. Your follower doesn't do any of the above? Well that might be because she has no space for it. Giving space can be achieved also through various ways. A very common one is to give space in the swingout on the beats 7 and 8, or on 1 and 2 or both. To give space on 7 and 8 just let her continue the direction you started leading and she'll be free to move around, i.e. to style. Beats 1 and 2 are also a good place; leading in on 3 will give her two more beats.

Followers, generally speaking if there is something you really want to say at that moment, go ahead. The same goes for leaders. Being quiet is definitely not the same as listening. Leaders, if you want to keep a good conversation going you'll need to listen and show interest in what your partner tells you. Ever been in a class when the teacher told you to "pay attention to your follower"? Listening is exactly what he was talking about. What is she doing? Is she maybe switching styles? Did she just listen or did she talk? Did she switch to a new topic? Be aware also that not listening can easily be interpreted as rude.

Going further: Sentences from two different people do not alone necessarily make for a good conversation. What you need is not just pure talking, but the content of what you are saying should relate to what your partner just said. In a conversation, that can be an answer to a question or a response to a statement. Responding can be done for instance by taking over the new style that your partner introduced (e.g. adding a bounce), but here again there are so many ways. Be alert and play around.

A careful reader might have noticed that I suggested 'smiling' as a way to talk. Smiling is not a lead, so how come I mentioned smiling? A good connection is not just physical. In a good conversation there are quite often emotions involved. This is nice to know when you are speaking because it adds an extra communication level which will open a whole new mode of information transfer. It's not so much about the amount, which of course grows too, but you gain the possibility of transferring different types of information. There might even be different information transferred simultaneously. This level has the nice feature that both of you can transfer information at the same time.

Something I've seen a number of times is the repetitive use of one styling. If you think of everything you do in dancing as talking then repeating yourself all the time is like telling the same joke over and over again. At some point that joke just isn't funny anymore. It is hard, especially as a beginner, not to repeat oneself because to a certain degree things need to be repeated for learning purposes. So not repeating oneself is addressed more to advanced dancers. If you can listen to the music, try to get new things out of it or watch yourself and when you find yourself repeating the same things be open minded, look at other dancers, be innovative.

The above addresses only the situation of two people interacting, specifically the couple that is dancing together. But hey, I'm sure you've had conversations with more than two people involved. Having more than two people can be difficult in dancing simply because it's unusual and seldomly taught. These

conversations are usable as well as totally in accord with the above. Stealing¹ is one of those situations. Assume you have one follower and two leaders. Yes, it's very likely that the leaders will communicate a lot trying to find even smoother ways of stealing the follower which doesn't mean nobody is paying attention to the follower anymore. It is a different way. The follower is now the topic of the dance and thus has quite a lot of influence on the conversation. You can make it easy to be stolen or hard or.... It's a new situation, a new playground! Another situation, maybe a little more likely, is two leaders doing the same by calling out moves. Of course the main conversation of the leaders is directed at each other and not at the follower. There are two ways of continuing from here. First, if the followers are advanced enough, they can start a conversation with each other. Or if they feel sort of left out, a polite leader will turn the focus back towards his follower. Other situations with more people involved can include competitions, when the other people involved might not even be dancing. Stay open-minded on conversations with more than two people. They can be fun!

One last parallel, probably the one which will draw most disagreement: If you are asked for a dance it is usually considered impolite to refuse. But looking at the metaphor of conversation, I do think there is at least one good reason for declining a dance. Sometimes you get asked by someone with whom you just have nothing to talk about. It happens. That conversation would turn out to be very one-sided or pure small-talk and therefore very unsatisfying. To turn down such a dance is in my opinion acceptable. This doesn't mean you should turn down the dance, and one should keep in mind of course that you can never be 100% sure.

Having said all the above, I hope I was able to give you ideas or maybe simply a more detailed view of dancing. Feel free to pick those parallels that fit for you. I'm very interested in your views and feedback. Thanks to all the people who listened to me while I was still trying to sort my thoughts on this topic, especially Rocío. Also thanks to Max for improving this paper quite a bit! Before finishing this paper I do want to remind everyone that when dancing, having fun is the highest goal you can aim for.

¹<http://www.gac.edu/~vhailper/docs/stealing.pdf> is a little out-dated but will give you the idea of stealing if you don't know what it is