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Is Scottish Country Dancing *Fun* or *Life-Threatening*?

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The author looks forward to your reactions to the ideas put forward here. The article is not intended to offer fully formed recommendations for change, but rather to encourage and stimulate discussion. Letters and emails will be included in future issues and shared with appropriate individuals at the TAC Executive and RSCDS Headquarters. Editor.

Two years ago, while my wife Ellie, friend Elaine Brunken, and I were co-tutoring the Washington DC area Candidates' Class, I was also taking a class in how to teach scuba diving. Run by the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI), and called the Instructor Development Course (IDC), it was a many-month training session of classroom work, practice teaching, and interning during real classes, culminating in a set of theory, diving, and teaching exams administered by personnel from the PADI headquarters. Sound familiar?

I realized that what we were trying to do for our candidates was exactly what my IDC instructor was trying to do for us divers: simultaneously get us ready to pass an exam, and get us started down the road of being quality instructors. These are conflicting goals for the tutor, and confusing to the candidate; this is true for both SCD and scuba diving.

I learned a lot from the IDC that has helped me be a better teacher of SCD, and a better tutor of SCD teachers. Let me explain some aspects, provide some conjectures on how we might improve the teaching of SCD and tutoring of candidates, and offer some suggestions. None of this is meant to disparage our SCD or tutoring; it is intended to relate some "lessons learned" that have made a difference to me, and which might help you. Ideas for candidate classes and ideas for our regular weekly classes and monthly socials are mingled.

Positive Teaching

Scuba diving is fundamentally life-threatening. There are several things you can do that will injure you, or even kill you. But the instruction of it almost never mentions these things, because they are negative statements. The entire training regime for scuba diving is positive: "We are here to have fun, and we will have fun in such a way that we are safe while doing it." The attitude taught in the IDC is that these are adults, spending real money and precious time, and if they aren't having fun then they won't come back. They have lots of things they can do with their time and money; scuba diving must compete for their attention, or they will go elsewhere.

Scottish Country Dancing is NOT fundamentally life-threatening. But it often seems to be taught as if it were! And it is too often taught that you must do it the right way, with an implied "or else." It is, frankly, negative teaching, and we wonder why adults make decisions not to come back. Some have argued that this is simply a difference between traditional British school approaches and the more "user-friendly" approaches common (for example) in the U.S. I want only to raise the issue of being positive, emphasizing the fun, and not being negative and obsessive about a lack of correctness.

Put the fun first, and always remember these adults may not return if they are not having fun.

Here's an example of that, from the diving training. We are taught to demonstrate something (underwater or at the surface), then ask the student to repeat what's been demonstrated. Sound familiar? Then we're taught to say – using these words until we can find our own equivalent – "Good job! I particularly liked the way you ____ (fill in the blank). It might work even better if you ____ (fill in the blank)." I MUST find something positive to say, before I offer a suggestion for improvement! Wow! Try THAT in your next SCD class! Watch the response!

Demonstrating Skills

In scuba we must demonstrate something before asking the student to do it. In the IDC training, we are graded on the ability to demonstrate something so a student can see it clearly. The grading is a score from 1 to 5:

1 means I was barely able to do it;
2 means it was tolerable; and
3 means it was done well enough that if somebody did it that way, they'd have done it competently.
(Here's the important part...)
4 means I did it well, and slowly enough that it would be easy to follow it and mimic it; and
5 means a 4, plus I made it look simple.

Scores of 4 and 5 are what an instructor must have; one is trying to teach, after all, not just be competent.

There are 20 fundamental skills one must master well enough to get at least a 3 on all of them, and a total of at least 68 points. The peer pressure among the IDC candidates is to get at least 4's, and 5s on a third of them. We spent hours in a swimming pool practicing in front of each other to up our scores. I am still proud that during my IDC I scored 4's on a third of the skills and 5's on two-thirds, and during my Instructor Exam in front of the PADI examiners, I got 5's on all four skills that were pulled out randomly for me to demonstrate. The hours paid off, and we candidates all "high-fived" each other at the end of the skills exam, pun not intended.

Our equivalent in SCD teacher-training is to look at the footwork and dancing in our Candidate Class, and demand 3's at best; we might even tolerate a few 2's. It is hardly mentioned that the point is to demonstrate a skill to the student; we focus mostly on showing that we can dance. And we have no equivalent list of 20 fundamental skills. We have 5 steps and a longish list of figures, but no clear feedback system (like 3's minimum and 68 points) to tell our candidates how well they are doing, and where they need to spend time with each other or in front of a mirror self-helping. Such rigor might be a bit much in our regular classes, but it might be very useful in our teacher training classes.

The 20 fundamental skills in the diving training also allow a natural sequencing of a class. You can't teach how to share your air with another person until you are comfortable taking your air supply out of your mouth and putting it back. That sounds trivial, but it provides a basis for building up the class content from session to session.

How do we do the equivalent in SCD? We do talk about it, and try and do it – for example, we teach pas de basque before teaching poussette – but I'm not sure most teachers have thought through which are the fundamental skills and which are the derivative skills -- the things that can be added on later. We assume that the footwork comes first and then we'll add on the geography. This works for people with a lot of body awareness (women?) and less natural spatial orientation, but what about the people who have great spatial orientation (men?) but not much body awareness?

In scuba diving, we demonstrate the skill to the class, and then one at a time the students demonstrate it back to us. If it is OK, we go to the next student. If it is not OK, we work with that student before going on. If the remediation can't be done right then and there, relatively quickly, then an "assistant instructor" in the class takes over with the student while the instructor goes on to the next in the class. Assistant Instructor is (an actual rating, for which one takes exams and gets certified, like a Preliminary Pass in SCD; more on this later. In SCD, we demonstrate (probably not enough), we request performance, and we then say to the group at large, "Some of you were not ____", and expect the offenders to know it was them and magically correct it!

In diving, if the student can't, for example, get water out of their masks, we don't say "do it again," we say (or demonstrate) the element of the performance that they need to correct to do it right. That is, we tell/show them what they need to do – what action to take – rather than give them the objective and expect them to figure out how to achieve it. In golf, the pro doesn't say, "Hit the ball farther and straighter," but rather, "Take more back swing and keep your head down." In SCD we say, "Phrase it better." Perhaps we should say, "Take shorter steps so you don't get there so soon."

Role Models

In diving, the instructor is a professional, and taught to be the role model. The training and culture encourages instructors to dress well, keep fit, stay positive, and always appear to be having fun. You dive

responsibly, have perfect buoyancy control, don't bang into the coral, don't irritate the moray eels, and don't steal the sea shells. The principle is to be the diver you want your students to be, because they will do it the way you are doing it. The "enforcement" of being a good role model comes from the peer pressure elsewhere in the professional ranks and from a regular mention of it in the professional literature.

We observe this is true in SCD too. How many times have you looked at a dancer's pas de basque and thought, "So-and-so must have taught that person!" We, as teachers, are SCD role models, whether we intend to be or not. This carries over from our dancing style to our partying style, and to how we greet and interact with new students. And it includes our attitudes toward technique, correctness, social etiquette, and probably whether we put insoles in our ghillies.

Instructional Syllabus

The scuba diving instruction is done in a very methodical way (built upon a very expensive educational design over many years), constrained by a syllabus that has almost no freedom in it. The buildup of skills and what happens in the second versus third class is not at the discretion of the instructor. There are a set of specific skills that I must demonstrate and get sufficient student performance on in each class. There are also a set of "dive flexible skills" that I can throw into any class because they do not need to be in sequence after or before some other skill. So I have freedom to adjust the class to the students, to toss in something fun at the moment they need it, etc. However, the benefit of the constrained syllabus is that another instructor can take over my class, or the student can go to some other instructor's class, and fit right in.

If our basic SCD classes were equally constrained, they would possibly be more efficient, could be tuned up very tightly over time, we could address the individual students, and the students coming out of each basic class would have an identified set of skills for the next phase of their dancing.

Assistant Instructors

In scuba, the professional ranks comprise three levels. A *Divemaster*, at the lowest rung, is trained to be helpful, to do certain things independently and others things only under the watchful eye of an instructor, to be able to demonstrate those 20 skills with lots of 4's and some 5's, and to work with certified divers more than with beginning student divers. At the upper rungs are various levels of *Instructors*, who have been trained to work with the beginning students and to offer various specialty courses. In between, on the middle rung, is the *Assistant Instructor*, who has taken all the training to be an instructor but has not yet taken the instructor exam given by the visiting examiners from headquarters. The "AI's" can do everything the Divemasters can do, and a few of the things the Instructors can do.

Most classes have an Instructor and either a Divemaster or AI helping. If the instructor demonstrates a skill, and one of the students is not able to show competence in it, then the helper works with the student to improve the performance, and later the Instructor evaluates the performance. The Divemaster and AI often become Instructors, but usually only after a period of working in the classes (and leading fun dives in open water) and apprenticing to the more experienced Instructors.

We have something quite similar to this in SCD, of course, with one enormous difference. Our "Prelim's" are like a combination of the Divemasters and the Assistant Instructors; they have much of the training, but not all of it. In today's version of the examinations, their dancing competence is supposed to be complete, so the Full Certificate class can focus on teaching. Here is the big difference: in scuba the Instructors can train and certify the Divemasters locally and the more experienced Instructors (the Master Instructors, on yet a higher rung of the ladder) can train and certify the Assistant Instructors too. Only those on the highest run of the ladder – the Course Directors – can train the Instructors, but they cannot certify them; that must be done by the visiting examiners from Headquarters.

How might this work in SCD? Our Candidate Class Tutors would be able to train and certify against a very clear set of standards "Teaching Assistants," who would be just like our current Full Certificate dancers but without the examination in front of the examiners from Headquarters. The Teaching Assistants could work with individuals to get that pas de basque tuned up, or give feedback on posture and arms, etc, but they would not be credentialed to say that an individual has passed the "John Drewry Class" and is ready for the Challenging Dances Friday night party. The advantage of this scheme is that we could get more people into

the teaching ranks, with less stress from having to go through the full-scale exams. At some point, when they are ready and the logistics are convenient, they could sit their exam in front of the examiners from Headquarters and get fully credentialed. Another advantage is that this would allow the visiting examiners to deal only with the final stages of preparation to be a teacher; they would leave the early stages to the existing teachers and tutors.

There are a lot of possible variants on this, but the main idea is to delegate to the existing teachers – or maybe only to a subset of them who take some extra training and receive some additional credentials – the responsibility to certify the beginning states of the next generation of teachers. Headquarters would only focus on that final stage. The simplest version would be to say that Candidate Class tutors can “certify” Prelims, and train Full Certificate Teachers, but only Headquarters can certify the Teachers.

Classes

This brings up the rather sensitive issue of what brings the students to a particular class, or drives them away to some other class? There are several obvious things, well-documented and not controversial.

- 1) Location and timing
- 2) Quality and comfort of the facilities, especially the dance floor and
- 3) Use of music with decreasing desirability: live music, good CD's and sound system, tapes and poor sound, old records.

Then there are some less well-documented and more sensitive things.

- 4) Quality of the teacher (s') knowledge, experience, attitude, commitment and
- 5) Attitude of the class (its *culture*, is it welcoming to new dancers, fun versus obsessive)

Numbers (4) and (5) are the tough ones. Most groups can't change their teacher(s), and changing the culture of a class is something that is difficult, slow, and rarely successful. The problem is that all of us have had the comparative experiences of being in a class that has had stimulating, challenging, positive, fun teaching, and those that are, well, less so. Which would you choose to go to week after week? And if only the latter were available, would you still choose to go at all? There is demonstrable evidence in our shrinking SCD community that the five criteria above are not being tuned up so that people are attracted to the activity. It could be any of the criteria above that are working against us, but we need to look inward to understand how to make needed changes.

Rethinking our fundamental structures

In scuba, one takes classes in order to get better at diving, but the main point is to go diving. In SCD, we mingle the learning/teaching in classes with the sociability of dancing, and occasionally have pure social events. In scuba, the training and the diving are quite separated. In SCD, they are quite mingled.

Dive centers that offer classes at places and times that students don't want to take them go out of business. Dirty, unhealthy swimming pools drive people away, as does poorly maintained equipment. All surviving dive centers have tuned up items (1) and (2) above as well as they can, so it makes little difference to student choice. Surveys have shown that students often choose a dive center based on their interactions with the instructors; if the “chemistry” is not there, if the student doesn't like the attitudes or approach, they go elsewhere. Sound familiar?

But here is one of the biggest things I've learned from the scuba business, and the one that we should think about as a dancing community: dive centers speak of the three “E's,” namely Education (initial and continuing training), Equipment, and Entertainment (including travel, scuba clubs, and other social events). People become divers mainly for the Entertainment; dive centers survive by selling Equipment; and the purpose of Education is to get new divers into the system. This separation of the enterprise into its constituent parts, with clarity of the role of each part, is extremely useful in helping the dive centers decide where to focus and determine how they are doing.

Some people, of course, find fun in continual self-improvement. They take scuba class after scuba class and collect certification cards for identifying fish or underwater photography; their fun is in the continual learning, as well as in the diving.

In SCD we really only have Education and Entertainment, but we merge them together so that those who want to be Entertained are constantly involved in the Education, whether they want to be or not. Groups sometimes try to separate these things, for example, by having the Class early in the evening and then having social dancing. However, if we were to follow the scuba strategy, we'd have

- 1) A Basic class with a specified set of skill that people can show mastery of, and then graduate. This class would be run at frequent intervals over a short period.
- 2) A choice of continuing education activities to suit the various interests (demo classes, difficult dances, advanced technique), with each having specified skills and graduations.
- 3) Lots of opportunities to use all these skills in weekly social dancing (NOT classes), monthly parties, away-weekends, and week-long adventures involving travel and dancing for vacations.

What's different about this? The focus of the community would be on the Entertainment, and all the Educational activities would be ways to get more people into SCD and to get into some of the more difficult or challenging kinds of Entertainment. For example, you wouldn't be able to come to the *Friday night challenging dances party* unless you had completed the *challenging dances class*. More importantly, it puts the focus back on the fun, with the classes having continuously evolving membership as people rotate through and complete them. One might still have the occasional large workshops, because that is a special event and fun in its own right. It's time to get back to the *entertainment* aspects of SCD.

What is the analogy to those divers who want to keep on learning, and take class after class? It is those dancers who are always testing their own competence, and want to take lots of instruction from different teachers so they can get better and *do it right*. For these people, who I would estimate are at most a quarter of the dancing population, blending classes and dancing works well . . . if the class is constantly challenging them and giving them new material and new feedback. Mostly, of course, our one-size-fits all classes do not work for these dancers.

So here we are, with our weekly class that might make a quarter of our dancers happy with the continual learning and improvement, and we pitch its level at the others, who aren't really interested. Are we surprised people drop out?

I recently chatted with dancers from an area that has several classes. It was clear that one of the classes was taught as pure fun; footwork and technique were not part of the evenings, but social interactions and fun were. This class was large and growing. A few of those dancers wanted more, so they would also go to one of the other classes where technique was emphasized, a small but dedicated group. Perhaps those groups have inadvertently got it all figured out: don't make everybody keep learning and improving, but make sure that is available.

The SCD community is shrinking in many places, and evidently shrinking world-wide, so we need to look carefully at how we run our activities, and what our objectives are. There may be some lessons in other leisure-time activities that will help us. What lessons can you draw from your activities outside SCD?

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