

serTA Workshop - Sunday 28 September 2025

held in West Horsley Village Hall

Strengthening the Teaching of Formations / Skills Exercises

led by Andrew Nolan, supported by Adam Brady on the piano

1. Introduction and Warm Up

1.1 The morning session started with a 'Round the Room' 2 facing 2 reel **'Welcome to Higham Hall'** – an interesting 'Starter Dance' packed with discreet formations – Ladies' Chain; Promenade; Set and Cast; Progressive Rights and Lefts. A good start to the morning session.

1.2 This was followed by joint loosening exercises to ensure our joints and muscles were ready to dance.

1.3 To emphasise that formations can be taught, strengthened or teaching points added without dancers really realising, then followed:

The Ferryboat (R/J32, Hunt, Let's All Dance): a progressive circular dance utilizing similar movements; useful for many formations, e.g. the phrasing of the handing in Rights and Lefts or other Chain formations.

Circassian Circle (R32, RSCDS 1): Rights and Left, Set (twice) to partner and turn both hands, Ladies Chain and Poussette. Rights and Lefts in a 2 facing 2 is good practice for the polite turn as this is usually done with a partner.

Sheena's Saunter (X32, Guide to SCD): circular dance which included Advance and Retire, Grand Chain and Promenade. This was deliberately chosen for the quick Chain which appeared in 2.3 The Tea Pottery. Introducing difficult passages during warm ups means a leader has the attention of the whole class at once before going into sets.

2. Graduated learning, Language and Perceptions

2.1 Andrew pointed out that a **helpful teaching tactic is to 'build up' by incorporating increasingly complex formations into dances.** He emphasized the need **to use language which can be understood by class members.** **There is a lot of jargon in Scottish Country Dancing.**

2.2 From our 'sets' we broke into small groups to discuss what technique points we might raise in teaching **Schiehallion Reels.** Those mentioned included:

- Short steps and longer steps
- Travelling to the right
- Lady follows the route taken by her partner
- Requires precision in keeping time to the music
- Every two steps dancers are either in the centre or at the 4 external points of the square set.

2.3 We then danced **The Tea Pottery (J96, RSCDS 54)** by Duncan Brown which embraced many of the above points including 8 bars of Schiehallion Reels and also the 8 bar movement **Chase and Loop**. The earlier dancing of Sheena's Saunter (see 1.3) was raised.

2.4 In an aside, Andrew pointed out that, in teaching, one **needs to be aware that not everyone sees things in the same way**. For example, in a triangular 3 couple set some people consider the home position to be the mid point of the base of a triangle and 2C and 3C on the mid-point of the other two sides, while others consider the home positions to be the three points of the triangle. His experience indicates that in any gathering approximately 50% favour each 'shape'. This was verified by serTA members' preferences.

2.5 We put the above into practice in the 3 Couple triangular dance **A Driving Reel (R32, Wratten, RSCDS 54)** which includes 3 couple, 8 bar Schiehallion reels ending 2 places anticlockwise. This was chosen to show the benefit of learning Schiehallion reels in the more familiar square setting before then adapting them to the triangle set.

3 Understanding your class's abilities

3.1 We then had a discussion about the abilities (especially physical ability) of class members, and the challenges these can entail with formations. The reel **Dancing Forth (R32, Grant, RSCDS 54)** was used as an example, where, within the first eight bars, the dancing couple set, $\frac{1}{2}$ turn RH moving down to 2nd place, pull back their right shoulder to face and set to and turn 1st corner 2H. Within our sets we were asked how we might lead into the teaching of this for (a) a routine social class, and (b) a class with some less mobile dancers.

3.2 The main messages – for physically fit dancers – were:

- Positioning is all important
- Think through in advance where you want to be positioned to start the next movement
- Practice awkward/more difficult movements separately, possibly in a different format e.g. a circle – which lets everyone practice together. Both big circle and set based skills exercises for the first 8 bars were shown and worked.

3.3 For less mobile dancers, the movement(s) can be modified to ensure their safety – in this instance:

- reduce the turning by omitting the 'twirl' and take the 'easy' way in

3.4 In this instance, these modifications affect only the dancing couple. Therefore dancing couples could choose together whether or not they wish to dance a modified version. The important point is that **movements must be appropriate for class members**.

4 Teaching more complex movements

4.1 In teaching more complex movements, it can be helpful to **'add on layers' to more familiar movements**. An example of this is **The Ullapool Ferry (R32, Houghton, RSCDS 52)**, building on the 'Hello-Goodbye' setting in order to learn 'Hello Goodbye Poussette'.

4.2 Following a lunch break, we warmed back up by dancing **Circle of Cheer (R32, Hamilton, Let's All Dance 2)**

4.3 We then continued to focus on teaching movements which could be less familiar to the teacher, let alone to the class. We broke into small groups (2 or 3 couples) to consider learning points in the following formations and how to effectively introduce them to a class.

- 3 couple Espagnole
- The Rosette
- La Girandole
- Spiral Progression
- Allepouss
- Tournée

4.4 These helped us put into practice many of the learning points made in the morning session (not repeated here). Formations such as the 3 couple Espagnole and the Allepouss can easily be built up using well known formations (2 couple Espagnole, and 2 couple Allemande and Poussette, respectively) as foundations. For other formations, practicing the unusual parts or parts dancers are likely to find tricky before teaching could be useful (e.g. $\frac{3}{4}$ RH across in the girandole, or identifying the end position of the chase in the Spiral progression). It was useful to learn that a skills movement or formations exercise is sometimes counterproductive and some formations, e.g. the Tournée are often best taught by just showing the formation itself. Before any class, **it is important that the teacher knows thoroughly each movement they intend to teach**. Also, bear in mind, **there could be an error in a crib – so ensure you read these thoroughly**.

5 Recognising the needs of Beginners

5.1 In order to focus on the needs of learners, Andrew introduced a simulation aimed at reminding teachers to **recall what it is like to be a beginner**. Beginners have simultaneously to decipher the jargon, attempt to memorise the movements, and concentrate on footwork.

5.2 Andrew summarized the 4 stages of learning

1. Unconscious incompetence – you don't know what you don't know; this is an absolute beginner turning up on the first night.
2. Conscious incompetence – you become aware there is a lot about the subject you don't know
3. Conscious competence – you can do the skill but there is a lot of concentration required to do it
4. Unconscious competence – you can do the skill proficiently without thinking about it

Additionally, a fifth stage, educator, has been added where you are proficient not only in doing, but being able to explain the skill to others in a way that they can also learn the skill.

5.3 In order to illustrate the challenges faced by beginners, Andrew focused on the dance Woo'd and Married and A' (J32, Wilson's Companion to the Ballroom/RSCDS 16).

Just before asking for music, the class found out it was a 9/8 jig rather than the usual 6/8 jig. This simulates conscious incompetence – the class knows there is a gap in knowledge about what steps to use and how to use these steps to complete formations they may not understand fully how to do.

Step practice of hands round and back in 9/8 (12 steps each way), and skip change (gallop method, 12 R, 12 L, 6 R, 6 L, 3 R, 3 L, 3 R, 3 L) consolidated the steps to be used. At this point, dancers have moved to conscious competence – they know the steps and are able to complete the dance; however they are very focussed on maintaining the 3 R, 3 L skips for the skip change. There is little opportunity to think of handing, phrasing, covering etc. This is the stage beginners stay at for varying lengths of time.

A few repetitions of the dance start to allow dancers to think about elements other than getting the steps right.

At this point, many are at or on their way to being unconsciously competent.

The class finished with a 6/8 version to bring us back to normality.

General verdict – Challenging! But **bear in mind the needs of beginners and appreciate same.**

6 Vote of Thanks and Close Down

6.1 Following a brief 'Cool Down', Andrew and Adam were applauded and warmly thanked for a most interesting and challenging day.

Betty Arrol

