

CR: Welcome to Calling card: the podcast where we talk about all things social folk dance in the UK. This week we are talking about teaching with Bob Morgan and Ali Messer. I'm going to get them to introduce themselves.

BM: Hi, I'm Bob and I'm a caller from Warwickshire and I'm a science teacher in my day job.

AM: And I'm Ali and I live in London and I play music for a number of different kinds of dance and I teach teachers.

CR: So first up I am going to ask Bob: how much of a caller's job do you think is actually teaching?

BM: Well, that depends very much on the context that you are talking. So, if I'm calling for a dance for a wedding, or something like that, I'm actually doing quite a lot of "teaching", but I don't want the audience to realise that I'm teaching them. But you are introducing them to a form of dance that they are not familiar with. If I am at an evening dance for as a contra series, or something like that, the level of teaching I am doing might be less, but I want them to notice *even less* that I'm teaching them things. And then there are all points in between. Workshops, for instance, should have a fairly large amount of teaching in them, but whether they do or not is a matter for further discussion, I think.

CR: So, I want to talk more about what you were just saying about the differences between different kind of events, how do you feel that workshops are generally used at the moment?

BM: So there are some excellent workshops that lead you through figures or techniques and are teaching skills, but the vast majority of workshops in the social folk dance world I would say are, as Gareth Kiddier describes them, "Dances beginning with the letter G" where they are a collection of dances which boil down to an hour/an hour and a half of doing some dances that the caller thinks are interesting. And that can be a valid thing to be doing if it is introducing an interesting thing but generally it's not advancing the cause of being a better folk dancer.

CR: So I've heard on multiple occasions, from often experienced dancers, that dancers don't want to learn about technique.

BM: I think this is a little bit of a fallacy I think dancers, particularly more experienced dancers feel they don't want to be learning technique but I think what they really mean is they don't want to be *patronised* about being taught technique. Often that's paired with another complaint which is that young people nowadays don't know how to dance. And that, I think, really highlights a significant problem that young people *don't* know how to dance because no one is teaching them how to dance. And it's going to need compromise in order for workshops teaching how to dance being accepted.

CR: Ali, as someone who works with a lot of different callers, what is your perspective on how callers incorporate teaching in their events?

AM: I think that's a really interesting question and again I agree with Bob, that it's an important part of the caller's job, whatever the event is, to do some kinds of teaching. But in my day job when I'm teaching beginning teachers, a lot of beginning teachers want lots of cool activities and one of the things you have to get them to consider is: why are you doing those things and what do you want the people - what do you want the children in the classroom - to learn. So if you are at a social event and you are a caller, and you are a new caller, you may think that your job is to come up with lots of really new and exciting dances, or really clever ways of calling old great dances, whereas I think there are two things going on that new callers could think a little bit more about to everyone's benefit. And the first one is that, actually, whether it's a workshop or an evening dance or a ceilidh or a birthday party, it *is* a social event that people are dancing with other people and that one of the things you can do is that instead of saying I'm going to focus on something to do with technique, you can say "we are all going to enjoy ourselves more; we're going to be able to dance better with each other if we just take a moment to think about this". So, that's the first thing. So you're saying I want this to be a social event even though the kinds of event vary so I'm going to need to do a little bit of teaching to make that work better as a social event. And a specific example of that is one of my daughters is 19 and sees a lot of contra dancing at festivals. She's not sure that she wants to dance with people of every age group. She's quite interested in the gender-free and whatever, and what some callers do when they show something like various different ways that you can swing people is they are giving social opening, so they can say you can do a swing with somebody which means you are barely touching. You can do a swing with somebody that's incredibly energetic. You can do a swing with someone that expresses the fact you have been going out with them for three months and it's all really going absolutely beautifully now. So any dance is a social event and a good caller is going to be teaching people how in that social setting they can get on with each other. And the second thing and I'll make this really brief, because we can perhaps get back to it later, is that as a musician, the musicians are trying to communicate. And if the caller thinks that the only teaching that can be done is by the caller, and the only teaching that can be done by words, then that is a bit of a shame because they have this other group of people who are reaching out to the dancers all the time. And so making great use of the musicians at his or her disposal helps a caller actually *teach* the people in the room and to get the most out of the event that they are attending.

BM: Absolutely, having everyone comfortable really helps too. We as teachers are always trying to work for having our students comfortable and unstressed. We're doing a lot of work in my current school with an educational psychologist around that sort of thing. And if you have a comfortable band and a comfortable caller and comfortable dancers, you get so much further than you do if one of those parties is stressed by whatever it is. Whether it is that the caller is stressed by dancers they don't know; the audience is stressed because you are forcing them to do stuff that is difficult; or the band is stressed because the caller has asked them to learn fifty new tunes that they don't like.

CR: So what of experiences as a teacher do you use as a caller in those sorts of situations?

BM: So starting with working with the bands, I am trying to make sure that I've got a two way dialogue happening, so the bands can tell me if they don't like the tunes, and that I listen to

that and that I'm doing tunes that they like and they know. I think that's really important. With the audience, you can do a lot of things. Depends on the context, but if you can get down on the floor a little bit... as a caller I'm usually keen on staying on the stage for bigger events as it gives you a better overview of the whole crowd, but if you can get down maybe at the beginning get down and talk to the crowd, bring yourself onto their level so they know what you are doing. We had good success at Bristol just last week running a little beginners' workshop at the beginning. There weren't many beginners there to be fair, but just that little bit of the contact, getting the nice tweak to the atmosphere, that relaxed everyone I think. As a caller, making sure you are comfortable with your dances ahead of time and being comfortable changing your program if you need to really helps as well.

AM: So I just wanted to add to that, the name of the thing we are talking about at the beginning is "modelling", that Hemingway said that a great novelist doesn't just *tell* stories to make the plot move along or for you to understand the people, that you can *show* people. So you know you can set up a situation in which things are revealed. So a lot of the great callers that I've worked with will use some kind of participation, so they might go down on the floor, just occasionally or for a bit, and join in with the dancing. And what a lot of great callers also do is that they find that there are people that will respond to that who might be willing to have a go at something and show to everybody else that it is safe to try something new. Particularly when I've been playing for birthday parties and weddings and things like that, that you'll find somebody who may never have done any kind of traditional dancing of the kind that we are talking about but actually they respond fantastically to the music. And they might be there with their family or something and they really enter into the spirit of it and all the people that know that person then think that "If they can do this, then I'll have a go". For example: the people of the same age group, or the people who have worked with them, or the people who are related to them. But modelling is a really powerful teaching strategy and you can also involve the band in that so that, if you want to say "this is going to take a certain length of time", it's not that you necessarily have to have the band go down and dance on the floor with you (although I've also seen callers that do that) is that you can get the band to play along with things, so that as well as using words, you are saying that not necessarily this is what it will *look* like, but this is what it is going to *sound* like. And that is really powerful and useful to help some people feel like "I can do this; I'm going to join in; I'm going to try something different".

CR: Historically, there has been formalised teaching certainly in English Country Dance and in Scottish country dance traditions they are graded and they have accredited teachers. Do you think there is a role in the current English scene for something like that?

BM: I think that there is a possibility; there are some teaching opportunities like that that go on. There is a series over in Birmingham that is apparently going really well which is actually called Barn Dance Fitness and is an aerobics class essentially, but with ceilidh dancing, and that's going really well. The RSCDS and their Scottish teaching is obviously going really well. The counterpoint to that argument, I think, is the modern Western square dance scene, which certainly in this country, as far as I'm aware, is not working as strongly as it has done in the past because they've not kept as good a hold of all of their levels, I think. They've ended up with lots of people dancing at a higher level, and not running as many beginners' events. The important thing, I think, of any of these things, is that if you are going to start

having levels and if you end up limiting things by levels and saying this is a dance only suitable for people who have done - I think the Modern Western Square terminology is 'plus' level - if you can only do this if you are 'plus' level then you need to also make sure you still have got 'basic' level working as well. I'm not actually sure how the RSCDS works on its levels and things like that. I don't have any experience of that, but they seem to be running it very well keeping the momentum going where other things don't necessarily.

AM: I'm completely against it, for the following reasons. The first thing is because I think any kind of dance is social. So the idea that you are going to assess that kind of social experience I think is wrong. I also want dancing to be as inclusive as possible. So, I think that possibly fights against the idea that you might want to have levels. Then what would those levels be? And I suppose one of the things I'm looking for by playing music for dancing or when I'm going dancing is absorption and flow and being immersed in a situation and doing something creative with other people. So this idea that I'm being watched. I mean it's like the saying 'Dance like no one's watching'. That's what I want! I don't want people being judged on it. I do respect that many other very talented and expert people have a different view. I also think that learning to play well and dance well it is worthwhile so working on your footwork, working on your ability to dance with other people, working on your ability to dance in response to the music being played. I think that's all *tremendously* powerful and a really good thing but you know, assessing and grading them on it? Over my dead body.

BM: I think that I would actually agree with Ali, I think almost the inevitable consequence of assessing and grading which you can see with Scottish dancing and Modern Western Square Dancing is that you naturally have to have a body that is formalising this and you end up with something that is no longer a tradition at that point, it is something else. It's fossilised. I'm very much of the opinion that tradition is something that is done and that is changed and by its nature is changing. If we had a formal system of Playford dancing accreditation, for instance, I don't think Coventry Zesty Playford would exist: which is a very different expression of Playford dancing to what I suspect people who would have formalised Playford would have wanted to end up with. I think it is important to divorce the idea that teaching workshops that is levels and grades. I don't think levels and grades are necessary. I think it would be better to do a bit more teaching of the skills.

CR: When I was at Sidmouth, I went to some of the beginners workshops and when I spoke to one of the beginners - one of the people attending the workshop - they stated that they had gone to beginners workshops for several years but didn't feel confident enough to attend an evening dance. And whilst I don't know if that attitude is widespread, do you think we are doing enough to make our evening dances inclusive such that we cover the entire breadth of experience?

AM: Well I think there are a number of things that we could be doing better on this one. So people like Gordon Potts and Hugh Rippon used to talk about certain dances as having a "robust" quality, so that you could call dances at the beginning of the evening which would still work even if some people involved in it were going wrong. I think that would be very helpful. So you hopefully have a culture where people are not being pushed, they are not being harangued. But that is more likely if the person who's designing the program is aware

that there might be some people who are less confident who are arriving at the beginning, and therefore calling dances that are robust in the sense that they don't fall apart when a beginner makes a mistake. So that is the first thing.

The second thing that Hugh used to say is that some dances actually involved a lot of teamwork. I think it is also possible for a caller to identify dances that teach teamwork, that build in different kinds of teamwork. So, if you started an evening with some robust dances and then you moved onto some dances - and this could work for any folk dance genre it could work for Playford, it could work for contra, it could work for ceilidh - you build in some dances that encourage teamwork and then you can move on to do more difficult things and if people feel welcome at the beginning you hope that they are going to stay and not go home.

BM: It's taken me a little while to really get my head around something that I think is really difficult for callers and it's a really easy thing to fall into. At the end of an evening, people come up to you and say "I really liked *that* dance", and the people who come up and say that tend to be people who really like the complicated dances you've done, the new and interesting dances, and it's really easy to forget the 40/50/60% of the people who are thinking "Oh I really liked that one we did. We've not done that one for a while. It's a really nice traditional one, or out of the core repertoire". Working with Coventry Zesty playford, I've been doing a lot more of the old Playford stuff as opposed to the more modern compositions and I've been bringing that into my festival programmes and things, and I've yet to have anyone complain about me doing a simple dance. I think callers have got into this trap of wanting to do new and exciting and complicated dances but no one really complains if you do the easy dances. Everyone enjoys the easy dances. A good dance if you find really good points in any given dance. I think that's a key part of being a good dancer. So that's a thing we can do, is refocus on those dances.

AM: And our job is to make sure that we're focussing on the music, and so that if you're constantly having to learn new music to play for new dances. Actually the quality is very high, it's very difficult to maintain high quality musical performances if you're constantly having to play things that are new. A lot of musicians who are going back and digging into something that they've done before.

CR: Given all the things we've talked about that callers could do in order to be better. What aspects of the things you teach to teachers do you think that callers could learn? SO how do we teach callers? How should we be teaching callers? Starting with Ali.

AM: So I think it is really important that we encourage new callers to decide what are they doing this for and what have people come to the event for. So as an example, I used to work with a barn dance caller who wanted to start with the easy figures and get to the dances with the more complicated figures later on. Now I accept that the wonderful variety of figures is a great strength of the English tradition, but that wasn't actually why the people had to turned up to the event. So one of the things we talk about with new teachers is: what do you want the children to learn, and having established that, what do you need to know, what do you then need to do? And I think that would be a great starting point for a new caller. So, think about the event and the people who are attending it,.What do they want to get out of it and therefore what do I then need to know and be able to do in order to call a dance that will help them meet those goals?

BM: Absolutely, having your objectives clear is the first stage of any lesson and it's what do I want them to know, and how am I getting there. Particularly in workshops I quite often feel like people don't have that sense of I am teaching these things. They've gone "Ah no, I've got a workshop to do and I need to fill this time, what am I going to fill it with?". That's quite important. The other thing is we talk a lot in teaching about "assessment for learning", which is checking in with your learners and assessing whether they have learnt what they need to have learnt. A lot of things we do in a classroom wouldn't transfer into a calling situation, but just that idea of looking at your dancers and thinking "Have they really understood what I was wanting to get?" is a really powerful thing to do and then maybe going back and doing it in terms of dances then doing a different dance with similar figures. Do that or going "OK, I've really hit the ceiling now. I'm going to drop the next dance down in difficulty" because they are not having a good time, and ultimately as Ali says, they have got to be having a good time for anything to be worthwhile.

AM: I really agree with that, can I just add one more thing, which is that a lot of great teachers, if somebody doesn't learn something in a classroom then they know that that's their responsibility in many cases. And occasionally callers can get into this "well I'll blame the people who are in front of me" or "I'll blame the band for playing it too fast" or "the dancers went wrong" whereas in fact it is the other way round. You've got this responsibility when you are calling a dance and you don't blame the people for doing it wrong. They haven't turned up to be harangued; they've turned up to have a good time with their friends

BM: Not, just they haven't turned up to be harangued, they've turned up to have a good time and it is on the caller to take *all* the responsibility. It's something I've always said in workshops I've led for callers. It is *your* fault. No matter what it is, it is your fault. The dancers can never have any sense that they have done something wrong. They may well be, as in the case of a certain group of medical people who I will not name, not be able to tell right from left but that is still going to be the callers fault, because otherwise you are going to lose them and they are not going to have time.

So: formal training for callers. I think there is definitely scope for improving what we do. If you talk to a lot of established callers, they'll say "I learnt everything I learnt from just watching other callers" and in teaching peer observation is a fantastic thing. But you need to understand what you are observing before it makes any sense at all, in my opinion. And I think we could speed up the process of getting really good callers if we could improve that training. Maybe getting a bit more mentoring going between callers, and a bit more understanding on what you are looking at. I've been working on something that we have in teaching called "Teacher standards" which are a set of things to look at in your teaching process and make sure that you're hitting things and I would quite like to disseminate that a bit more widely. Getting people thinking about these things that I think are important for callers to be doing in their calling.

AM: I had a conversation with Karen Tweed, an amazing accordionist, about how people are taught and to develop their abilities as traditional musicians. And the expectation is that basically you just have kind of, the traditional route was, just a line of people, and there is a great player, and somebody who is pretty good who is next to that great player, and next to

them is another great player and so on down the line, and you learn everything just by learning by ear. But not everybody actually learns really effectively like that and I think one of the things we should do, I'm not sure if this is making it more formal, but we could be documenting it more. So it's really common if people are going to a music workshop for there to be music sent out ahead or one of the things I often try to do is create a playlist, you know, so that people can listen to things if they're not readers, and then you can take away some music or you can take away some suggestions for further listening. and there are some people interested in teaching callers like like Hugh at the round...

BM: Hugh Stewart.

AM: Yes, so he's kind of written down and documented a lot of his ideas and I think for some people that is really useful so that I think one of the things that I would like to see some of the newer and younger callers doing is creating resources either online or on paper that other people can take away, have a read, have a think about and kind of process away from the performance setting. So that when they go into call another dance, they are taking some new ideas with them.

BM: The other thing i think we could do with acknowledging again a lot more is that being a good dancer caller is not necessarily the same as being a good workshop leader in the same way that being a fantastic musician doesn't not mean that you are a natural workshop leader. I was having this discussion with some musicians I was working with recently who are going to Halsway manor residential and have been asked to lead some music workshops and have never led a music workshop before. They are very talented musicians but they have no idea where to start with that, in the same way that I imagine a lot of people just don't have a sense on where to start a skills-based or teaching-based workshop. It's one thing to stand up in front of a crowd of people and lead them through some dances. And it's a massively different thing to, for instance, as Andrew Swaine did a few years ago at Sidmouth, lead a group of dancers through all of Playford's works and interpretations thereof and reasons for it and give them a good experience.

CR: Thank you for sharing all your interesting experiences and ideas. What events have you got coming up, Bob?

BM: The main one I would like to mention is the New Year's Contra that I'm calling with Jake Wood and the Contrasaurus trio, which is in Warwickshire and the contact details for that are on Facebook. And folkdancing.co.uk is a catch-all domain for a number of different things, there is some of the things I have mentioned about calling, about gender-free calling , there are various websites for various callers there. And you may not quite have time to get to it but hopefully there will be a caller's development day, probably just happened by the time you listen to this. I hope we will have some resources out of that for you to look up, again that'll all be on folkdancing.co.uk.

AM: So I feel a bit of a fraud here because I'm not a caller but I have a gig coming up that people might be interested which is Momentum in Norwich, we're playing for a Playford Ball. The other thing is, an organisation that I've been involved with since the 80s that I think is very good at encouraging lots of people to dance, get involved with calling and in playing and that's the London Barndance Company. The events happen at Cecil Sharp House and

there are plenty of people who are not Londoners who go to that event. It's really common if you're playing or calling for this event thinking that you're going to go and call for a contra dance and there is a hen do or a birthday party or people from some other random continent who want to go some traditional dancing in London and so they turn up at the event. It's very inclusive and always has different people. So London Barndance Company run by Jane Curry and Andrew Findlay.

BM: I should probably mention also that I'm doing Leeds Contra in November and Brummie contras in November both with various combinations of Contra-Alt-Delete.

CR: Thank you very much.

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