

Enjoy Scottish Country Dancing!

A resource for group leaders and teachers

This document is the introduction to a resource the RSCDS is developing as an aid for anyone leading a Scottish country dance group or who is interested in starting one. It will enable you to access helpful hints, exercises and information developed and used by Scottish country dance teachers over many years.

Dance groups vary. Some are simply a group of friends who get together because they enjoy dancing, especially to wonderful Scottish music. Others are organised on more formal lines and might be affiliated to the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS); their members are interested in learning more about the steps and formations that make up the dances. Then there are the actual RSCDS classes led by trained teachers – large Branches may have several different groups from beginner to advanced technique and demonstration classes. This resource aims to offer something for everyone. Explore the introduction below and use whatever helps you share the joy of Scottish country dancing!

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Using the resource

Careful thought has been given to presenting the material in the Teaching Resource at different levels of complexity to enable all teachers or leaders to access material required for meeting the particular needs of their class. There will be three levels of detail, layered like a pyramid. This, the top, Introductory, layer lists helpful hints about all aspects of teaching Scottish country dancing, with a bit more detail about things that may help you to get started (Part 1).

A middle Guide layer is being developed: this will provide you with the core information you need to teach or lead a class or group. This middle layer is especially helpful in providing general guidance on presenting the different elements of a lesson or group session (Part 2). It will, for example, detailed guidance on teaching steps and formations. Embedded links between the Introduction and Guide layers will be added and other links from both will take you into the Treasure Chest, the capacious bottom layer: this is to be filled with a wide variety of information and ideas that you may find useful. We hope you will enjoy browsing the Treasure Chest and be inspired. You yourself will be able to contribute to this box of delights by sending in material for our editorial team to consider.

Within these pages there are frequent references to the RSCDS Manual of Scottish Country Dancing, generally known as 'The Manual'. Consult this whenever you want complete and detailed descriptions of steps and formations (figures), illustrated with photos. Take a look to see other very useful information contained in The Manual. Specialised videos to help the teaching of dances, steps and formations will, in time, be included here in this resource – it is useful to see real-life teaching examples – a picture is worth 1,000 words!

Part 1 – Getting started

Social group or formal class?

Dance groups come in all shapes and sizes, with different aims and aspirations – but they all need to have someone leading the action – even if this is done by every member of the group in turn. There is more to leading than just reading out a dance crib! Teaching skills are needed, whether you are taking a social group for a few ceilidh dances or training an advanced class for the DAA. Even in the most informal social class, everyone's enjoyment is enhanced by efficient instruction – so it is up to you, the person leading the group, to make sure you understand (the dance/ the movements and interactions that allow it to happen/ the formations that make up the dance/ the steps that enable the dance to be performed...) and can pass this information on clearly so that everyone 'gets' it. This resource will help you hone your teaching skills and will become a useful tool in organising your leadership activities.

When you start your group or class, reach out to others who may be interested by advertising widely, for example among local interest groups, in newspapers and on-line media, and in public places such as libraries.

Once your group is formed, what you do will depend very much on the needs and capabilities of its members – tailor your plans and approach to meet these needs. Things you might consider:

- what are the levels of experience within your group?
- is the group purely social / interested in learning some technique (a 'general' class) / a mixture of both?
- is a more specialised class wanted? – for beginners / for experienced dancers seeking challenges / aimed at competition or demonstration dancing / for people of advanced years and reduced stamina and bounce.....

- what are the challenges to satisfying the needs of the range of individuals within the group? Should they be managed together or do numbers and available time suggest some subdivision might be beneficial? (such as a beginners' half-hour at the beginning and an 'experts' half hour at the end).

You – the group teacher/leader

To be a good teacher / leader you will need:

- a desire to share your dancing experience
- patience; good temper; a sense of humour; empathy; a pleasant manner
- enough spare time to prepare things properly
- good analytical and planning skills

Aim to:

- interest the class and at the same time give them pointers to improve their understanding of dancing so that they enjoy the overall experience even more.....
- make it enjoyable – try to inject humour into your guidance if you can
- involve everyone and meet everyone's needs – keep everyone active
- plan everything *in advance*: session content and delivery plan; accompanying music; flexibility for contingencies

Teach by example

- *show* and tell – demonstrate clearly the sequence of movement/step/formation/etc that you are trying to teach, taking someone's place when appropriate
- keep verbal explanations to a minimum
- make your own dancing an example to imitate since people learn by observation
- don't be afraid of demonstrating repeatedly if necessary – but try to find different ways to show and explain the same thing – different people find different ways of learning helpful

Make yourself heard

- position yourself so everyone can hear you and can understand your instructions
- speak clearly and more slowly than in usual speech
- project your voice
- use a microphone if you find that this helps – you can even use a megaphone

Give clear instruction

- read and digest the original instructions yourself before the class; don't simply read out the instructions to your dancers
- to avoid confusion, give locational instructions in terms of *fixed places* (eg 'top'/'bottom'; 1st corner position') *not* with reference to numbered dancers, who could be anywhere once a dance is underway
- make sure dancers understand that the default instructions refer to the 1st couple, unless otherwise specified

Observe and give feedback

- move around, observe everyone and give help where required
- look out for and comment on things that need improvement, but keep the tone of your feedback positive and encouraging
- give pieces of helpful information (*teaching points*) a little at a time so people can absorb them

Signalling – useful ways you or other dancers can give help while dancing

- use visual or appropriate physical signals – these are immediately effective as a way to give helpful guidance to other dancers – words are difficult to process quickly
- choose (restrained!) movements of arms, hands, eyes, eyebrows, head etc to signal directions
- ask permission if an explanation requires touching – uninvited physical contact is not acceptable

Whatever your own plans for the session, **never** forget that people dance primarily to enjoy themselves.

Using Music

Choosing recorded music

- use the recommended music when you can – there are various possible sources
- find appropriate substitutes where necessary, bearing in mind tempo, spirit, unfamiliarity (ie not associated with well known dances)
- introduce your group to a variety of recordings with different instruments and playing styles

Playing recorded music

- consider the features you may want: ease of operation; speed and volume control; ease of selecting track and returning to its beginning
- explore the range of suitable media and devices
- investigate useful software: to manage music in use; to create customised tracks for specific purposes

Using recorded music in class

- plan your music in advance – playlists; music for warming up and cooling down; practice tracks; music for dances; backup tracks for emergencies
- know your device and ensure you can start/stop/ change volume/ etc easily

Working with musicians

- discuss your plans with your musician(s) in advance
- consult your musician(s) for their views on appropriate music and use of music
- remember your musicians are there and are human beings!

Using live music in class

- give good, clear, timely instructions to your musician as well as to the class
- don't forget the prompt to bring the musician in ('*with the music, ready..and..*')
- use the musician(s) as much as possible – don't let them sit around while you talk / do things without music
- be reasonable in what you ask for (eg generally no less than 8 bars quicktime/4 bars strathspey; minimise tempo changes)

Cue-ing and coaching

- use '*Ready...and..*,' when practising with music, to cue dancers to start moving, timing the words to indicate the tempo
- count beats when teaching steps to indicate rhythm to dancers – different counting for jigs, reels and strathspeys
- count while walking through formations and dances to emphasize phrasing

- coach rhythmically over the music during dancing – practise making your voice heard while not drowning out the music

Planning your dancing classes/evenings

General group management

- be punctual yourself and encourage punctuality in others – start and finish at the advertised times
- arrange the dancers so all can see and hear – move around to ensure you see everyone
- manage the ability range of those present to ensure universal enjoyment – make contingency plans that allow you to teach what you want at a level appropriate to all who turn up for a particular session

Managing numbers

- make flexible plans to cope with the numbers attending any particular session
- organise set numbers to involve all or as many as possible
- modify dances to fit awkward numbers but always make dancers aware of the correct version too – they will be dancing the normal version at social events
- keep everyone dancing all the time if possible – don't sacrifice the dancers' enjoyment in order to fulfil your own plans: remember you are there to serve them

Group goals

- be aware of what your group wants – different groups want different things, from getting a bit of interesting exercise with friends, through learning the dances for an upcoming event, to becoming proficient and skilled dancers
- tailor your plans to match both their wishes and their needs, such as becoming familiar with a range of formations so that the dances they come across become understandable and accessible
- familiarise your group with social dance etiquette to ensure that they feel comfortable, confident and welcome at dance events

The needs of individuals

- try to meet the individual needs of different dancers, such as beginners, experienced dancers, children, elderly and infirm
- present the group with challenges that can be mastered, chosen to match individuals' ability levels
- be aware that different people have different ways of learning – if possible, impart the same information in different forms to aid comprehension

Health and Safety

- be familiar with basic first aid
- know what to do in case of injury
- know where to turn in an emergency
- hydration! build in water breaks after vigorous activity

Part 2 Lesson content

Planning your class/evening session

Why warm up and cool down?

- warming up uses gentle whole body and individual muscle exercises to get the blood flowing, help breathing and warm muscles to prevent injury
- cooling down involves stretching exercises to help muscles return to their normal resting state
- a basic understanding of the underlying physiology enables you to tailor your warm up/cool down routines to accommodate the physical abilities and limitations of your class

Warm up and cool down

- start with an activity to warm up the whole body eg walking in different ways, moving the arms, or a simple dance, walked then gently danced
- move on to exercises that warm up muscles individually
- cool down after the session with slow stretching exercises
- warn people not to do what doesn't feel comfortable

Initial planning

- work out your session objectives
- plan the session – keep your class happy by doing easy/familiar things at the start and finish and put challenges in the middle
- decide how to arrange the group for each part of the session
- choose and make sure you have appropriate music for everything you plan in the session

Preparing yourself

- prepare by analysing and familiarising yourself with everything you want to include in the session
- if necessary, practise delivering instruction on things that seem challenging, until you are happy and confident with your approach
- consult The Manual for details of formations etc

Satisfying your dancers

- plan to ensure that as many of the group as possible dance as much as possible – build in flexibility – prepare alternatives to enable the session to fit round the numbers who turn up and their ability levels
- balance pure enjoyment and learning – learning is improved by enjoyment but enjoyment is also enhanced by achievement so offer manageable challenges
- make it **fun**

Teaching dancing

Acquiring skills

- make sure everyone understands the basic terminology. Even simple instructions like 'cast' are bewildering to the complete beginner so *show* and tell
- emphasize that well placed hands, strong arms and well poised bodies make a huge difference both to the flow of the dancing and to everyone's safety
- stress that eye contact is vital for communication – being sociable; giving each other help; working together

- help people learn to pace their movements to fit within the allotted musical phrase and to interact correctly with other dancers – phrasing is a vital skill
- explain how good covering enhances group satisfaction – but even trying to cover improves people’s awareness of other dancers, with overall benefits

Dancing together

- make people aware that mistakes inevitably happen so introduce coping strategies to keep the dance going
- encourage social skills and teamwork – interacting with your partner and the rest of the set; smiling; helping each other; dancing **with** others
- introduce social dance etiquette – help your group by familiarising them with common practices
- find ways to help dancers cope comfortably with the frequent gender imbalance in social dance classes – gender flexibility and gender neutrality

Teaching formations

All dancers need to become familiar with common formations, the ‘building blocks’ of Scottish country dancing. As your group’s leader/teacher, introduce new formations on a regular basis to help build up your dancers’ repertoire. To teach any formation:

Preparation

- check The Manual and watch videos to ensure you are thoroughly familiar with the formation, then work out how you will teach it
- arrange the group into 2C, 3C, 4C sets as needed for the formation
- describe the formation (name; progressive or non-progressive; number of bars; steps used; special phrasing)

Demonstrate and walk it through

- take someone’s place and dance the formation in this set (or if other members of your group are able, form a group of experienced dancers and ask them to show the formation, pointing out to your class what to watch for)
- walk the pattern to rhythmic coaching in your set then let the class try it (develop rhythmic coaching mantras for use with the particular formation eg. Quick-time poussette: away from the centre, quarter turn, etc.)
- walk the pattern with bar count (i.e. how it fits to the music) in your set then let the class try it

Practise dancing it

- watch the class dance the formation; repeat from the same places if necessary, giving extra hints and coaching
- have your class walk/dance from progressed place(s), if it is a progressive formation
- feed in teaching points gradually as the group uses the formation – don’t expect them to learn or remember everything at once

Teaching dances

Preparation

- choose dances that are appropriate for the level and needs of your group/class; obtain and study the original instructions if possible, and watch videos on line if any are available
- identify any formations, steps or other movements that may require teaching first; introduce these to your class or remind the class about them if some dancers are uncertain of them
- identify areas of the dance where dancers are doing different things at the same time (“meanwhiles”): you may need to walk each of the dancers’ separate parts first before putting the whole phrase together
- look for potential problems, awkward bits and transitions and give thought to how you will handle them

Teach the dance for 1st couple

- arrange the group into 2C, 3C, 4C etc. sets as needed for one time through the dance
- take someone’s place and walk the dance in your set, giving verbal instruction and helpful hints at the same time
- have every set walk the dance and be receptive to questions and any need to clarify challenging parts of the dance
- put on the music, return the walking couple to top place, and have your class dance once through to your coaching
- with dances that are challenging for your group you may need to teach the dance in smaller segments

Practise it for all

- send that couple to the bottom of their individual sets and walk through for other couples as needed
- arrange into sets appropriate for dancing the entire dance and give a final reminder

Teaching steps

The amount of time you spend in your class on footwork will depend upon the needs of your class and the wishes of individual members.

Establishing rhythm

- be aware that **rhythm** is the most important aspect of the step. It enables dancers to move in time with the music and one another. Emphasize this in your teaching.

Music for teaching steps

- for skip change and slip step use jig-time music (6/8)
- for pas de basque use reel-time music (4/4)
- for strathspey steps use a strong traditional strathspey

Using the music

- for recorded music good planning is vital – look for suitable music and speed – 8-bar (and 4-bar strathspey) tracks and tracks that speed up – use pre-recorded tracks or make your own
- if you have live music, discuss your intentions with your musician – ask for 8-bar phrases in quick time, 4- or 8-bar phrases in strathspey time; speeding up is easy

- when using recorded music, cue your dancers to start moving, demonstrating the required speed by the timing of your words: *'Ready ...and...'* – practise this until you are confident
- with live music, you need (at the same time) to cue your musician to start playing, demonstrating your required speed by the timing of your words: *'With the music, ready... and...'* – practise this until you are confident

Class arrangement for step instruction

- for travelling steps and slip step arrange the class in a circle round the room
- for setting steps, arrange your dancers in lines across, holding hands
- when you demonstrate steps, make sure you are visible to everyone

Teaching a step

- introduce the step: quick time or strathspey; character; uses (see The Manual)
- listen to the music and have your class clap the beats for 8 bars; demonstrate the step as they observe (if you are showing a setting step, mirror the class and explain that this is what you are doing); have the class try to dance the step, observing carefully to see if they have the rhythm
- walk the step to rhythmic cue-ing and have the class try, gradually building up speed (eg. for skip change, 'hop step close step' / for slip step 'left, close left, close left' / for pas de basque 'right beat beat and left beat beat and' / for strathspey travelling 'right together right pull-through, left together left pull-through' / for strathspey setting 'right together right lift, left together left lift').
- have your class dance the step, offer feedback, and try again
- NB – do not introduce the jeté in pas de basque until the rhythm is well established (the jeté happens on third beat of the bar)

Introducing foot positions

- with the class slowly walk the step, introducing the correct foot positions, stressing turnout, third position (feel the contact) and toes pointed to the floor
- demonstrate (or have a class member demonstrate) the step and suggest things to observe in the demonstration
- have your class dance the step, paying attention to their foot positions (although not looking at the floor) – repeat and offer feedback

Some members of your group/social class may want to spend more time on steps and footwork than others. Some may be complete beginners and need extra help in establishing rhythm with specialized skills exercises. Be flexible to accommodate everyone's needs and wishes.

Making progress

Improving your own teaching

- evaluate each session afterwards: did you meet your objectives?; what was successful/ unsuccessful and why?; think of changes you could make to improve future sessions
- analyse and evaluate how others plan and teach their classes: look for things you might try /adopt or avoid

Improving individuals' dancing

- should you give individual feedback? how much and to whom? – to those who ask
- refer dancers to videos; have a good dancer demonstrate and give pointers about what to observe

Making progress as a class

- give universal but effective feedback – be positive: first give praise, then suggest ways of making things even better
- plan a progressive term/year programme: frame your overall objectives and devise a series of sessions that build towards meeting these
- manage the conflicting needs of inexperienced newcomers and established class members

Part 3 Additional Guidance

In our Guide and Treasure Chest layers you will be able to find information on and links to many other topics:

Dance evenings and events

- writing a social dance programme
- organising a social dance or a ball
- organising and running a ceilidh
- MC-ing

Helpful handouts/ information for teachers

- lesson plan templates
- lesson plans – examples
- suggested warm-up and cooling down routines
- skills exercises for teaching formations
- skills exercises for teaching steps
- (and much more eventually)

Helpful handouts / information for group members

- various brief guidance notes
- terminology
- recruitment and publicity
- background logistics for setting up and running a group
- where to go for help/further advice and information
- (and much more eventually)

Teaching with a particular focus

- beginners' classes
- children, including SCD as a component of homeschooling
- coaching for competitive dancing and achievement awards (eg medal tests)
- disabled dancers
- low impact
- planning a demonstration and coaching a demonstration team
- U3A and other classes for those of advanced years, energy and enthusiasm
- workshops/weekend/week events; designing and teaching a short/ crash course in SCD
- young adults
- (many more topics will undoubtedly be added)

Bibliography

- core books and other print material
- core multimedia
- other published print and electronic teaching guidance