



Dancing a Routine vs Freestyle Dancing (as a couple)

What are you taught mostly when you learn dance?
Do you learn routines or do you only learn freestyle?



In either case, have you ever worried that you're not learning enough or wondered which is the best to learn?



Chances are you have not given it too much thought, but it's worth being aware of the relationship between the two so that you can better manage your progression as a student of partner dancing so, let's go over the nature of freestyle and routine and talk about how you can use them both most effectively.

Differences between the sexes

There are a few areas where what the Lead needs to deal with is a bit different from what the Follow needs to deal with and finding that balance between the use of freestyle and routine is one of them.

If you're a Follow, then chances are you're learning everything in a freestyle manner; even if you're learning a routine your instructor might tell you to focus more on simply following and to forget about the routine.

This will help improve your ability to follow whomever you're dancing with, so that you can basically do any routine. The paradox for the Follow; is that by learning freestyle only, they are better able to dance any routine.

If you feel that you are expected to remember routines too much instead of following, then you might want to talk to your instructor about what and how you're learning.

Leads on the other hand need to learn routine.

This is especially so when going for medals, gradings or competitions but, when you dance socially you will need to avoid other dancers (depending upon the nature of the dance the level of other dancers); you will need to dance at a level equal to or lower than that of your partner and you might just want to do something different for the pleasure of it and the enjoyment of your partner (who might have been put through that routine a number of times before).

This means that as the Lead you need to manage these two aspects of your dance learning.

The problem with routine

The biggest problem with routine is that you may find that it is all you can do!

You're robbed of your ability to freestyle and you suffer from all the problems that come from that; not knowing what to do when there's an obstacle; only knowing how to perform a step when it follows another certain step; getting bored with dance; or feeling that you're just not really a good dancer.

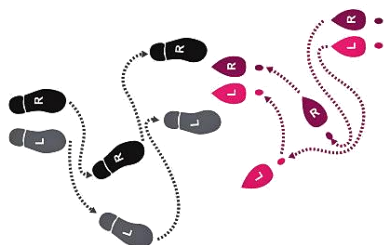
The advantage with routine



There are some advantages though...

A well-designed routine will show you how one step can lead into another.

It will ensure that you quickly learn a larger number of steps and it provides an easy way to know that you've covered each of the key steps for some level.



Finally, it can be useful to be able to draw on a routine so that you can put a number of steps together in a manner that feels very natural to you and your partner.



Dealing with the problems and keeping the advantages

Clearly there are a few reasons for learning a routine so, you should never give up on learning them, however you still need to ensure that you can freestyle.

There are three things that you can do to improve this:

1. Make sure that you get a chance to do so.
You might already do this if you go to a dance school that runs a lot of social functions that you attend or, you just happen to go to a lot of social dancing.
2. When you are dancing freestyle, think ahead.
Plan a mini routine in your head of say three steps and then execute them.

Depending upon your level, this might be quite tricky but with practice you will get better at it. You can always pull sections from the routines that you know too...simply doing them in a different order can be enough to break the bad effects of a routine.

3. Reflect on how your freestyle goes.
If you try something and it didn't work, then ask yourself why it didn't work.

You may find that it is because you didn't think clearly about how you should get into the mini routine in your head (sometimes you may not think about how you would need get out of it and then at other times realise that you did not think fully about how each step leads into the other). The routines you know can also be used to provide a good point of comparison!

As you contemplate your own routine, you will find that your understanding of dance and how/why the routines work, increases greatly.

Practicing partnered dancing

The best way to practice dance is to be aware of what the major mistake is that people make when they do practice so that you do not make it.

The biggest mistake made is practicing in a lazy manner.

What many of us fail to realise is that we are always forming habits; This means that when we practice in a lazy manner, we are much more likely to develop bad habits.

Some of these habits are:

- Poor foot work
- Poor posture/body positioning
- Poor musicality and timing
- Poor foot placement
- Poor leading/following
- Incorrect head direction



When you dance you want to ensure that you are not doing anything that might develop bad habits in these areas so, before you practice any of your partner dancing, do the following:

1. Decide if you want to dance with music.
Listening to music, but not making sure that you dance in time can create bad musicality and bad timing.
If you want to work on technique alone or drill a routine, then you're better off not listening to any music.

If you do decide to have music, then do everything in time to ensure this is a well-developed and no-corrupted skill that you have.
2. Review you dance space. If you have to dodge items in your home, then you will not be maintaining proper posture of body position. Take your dancing seriously, and move your furniture to give you space if you need it.
3. Consider your foot wear given the surface you're dancing on.
Do not wear runners on carpet (or anything really) and sometimes socks are better than shoes if they allow for more sliding on a floor that has too much friction.
You want it to feel as much like a dance floor as possible so that you can move your feet in the same manner.
Just a note: never try spins or swivels etc. on carpet: Blisters!
4. Be mindful of everything that you need to do to dance properly.
Where should you head be; how should you lead; how would you respond to the lead; do you turn your foot out or in; what's the hip movement here; is it a side step or more diagonal?
These are just some examples of what to think about.

It's a good idea to talk to your dance teacher about what you need to work on so you have a list of things to work on.

If you ignore these issues, then you will simply create bad habits that will later need to be broken - this can take quite a while.

If you do not feel like putting that much effort into your practice, then you might find that you're better off simply thinking about the dance and reviewing how it is best danced.

This is a perfectly valid way to dance and will not develop the bad habits that lazy practice might develop.

Sometimes less is more!

Dance In Your Mind

Between your lessons do you have a chance to practice the new figures, the new ideas that you have learned?

Can you dance a circuit around the lounge/kitchen?

Can you shift the furniture a little and make space in the living room?

Unfortunately, the driveway is just too rough to allow any kind of pivot, spin, or turn...but, a good alternative to real practice at home is practice in your head.

This works because the mind and the body are intimately connected to each other.

During real practice, we dance a sequence and that series of muscular activity is stored in the mind – not very firmly the first time but as we dance it again and repeat the steps, the mental record becomes firmer.

We talk about this kind of learning as ‘muscle memory’.

We get a dance into our muscle memory and we can do it more and more smoothly but unfortunately, there really is no such thing as muscle memory!

Muscles can't remember anything...it is a record of their activity that is remembered in the mind and we can put that record into the mind in ways other than by physical practice.

Again, physical practice establishes neural pathways in the brain but mental visualization, with no muscular movements at all, can do the same thing.

Mental rehearsal sends the brain through a neural workout that is very close to what would happen during actual physical practice and in a way, mental practice is even better than physical practice because we can visualize an ideal that we maybe can't actually perform at that time.

In our minds, we can run through a routine with no wobbles, no mistakes and so nail down that neural pathway.

Of course, we do have to get out on the floor but we'll be so much better prepared with a little mental practice beforehand.

Let's look at some mental strategies...some ‘mind tricks’:

In school, you used to take notes in class (maybe you still do). Would it be worthwhile to carry a little notebook during a dance class or private lesson?

The teacher tells you to lower a little before you move forward into an Open Telemark.

You try it...that is, you physically practice the action once but, you also find a moment to jot the idea down.

Now your potential for practice, for learning, for creating that “muscle” memory is magnified three-fold.

Through the simple act of carrying that little notebook your listening powers have increased.



You have created a clear intention to take one or two notes, so you listen for something to write down. Without the notebook, you might have been thinking about something else and missed that lowering idea but with the notebook, you are a little more alert and you don't miss it.

Already, your learning is fixed a little more firmly than it might have been.

Then you write it down.

The act of writing cements the lesson a bit more; You heard the lesson through your ears, now the lesson enters your mind through your writing fingers and up the nerves in your arm.

Even if you never look at the notes you take, the taking of them has doubled the power of the lesson, but of course, you do look at your notes!

On the drive home you thumb through the pages while your partner drives, or vice versa; you talk about how that felt; without it, sometimes it felt like you bumped into each other; with the lowering, it was smoother - a third reinforcement of whatever those neural circuits are that encode the idea of lowering before the step.

Without the notebook we might not have heard that point at all.

With it, we have heard it and practiced it in our heads three times...we're dancing in our mind!

When you watch a movie and the hero or heroine is really straining to overcome some obstacles, do you sometimes find yourself straining along in sympathy?

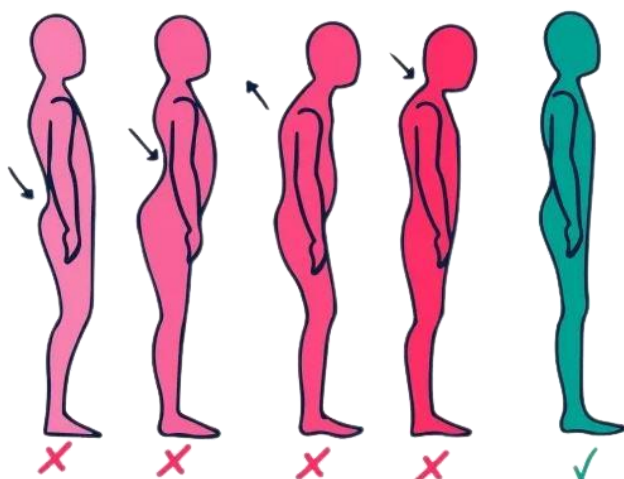
Record a video of your latest dance or find it on the Web, watch now and then and as you watch, put yourself into the action.

Don't just admire the smooth performance and enjoy the show but mentally make some of those moves yourself.

In summary, the steps in our learning sequence are:

1. Teacher shows it and we see – visual.
2. Teacher explains and we hear – auditory.
3. We try it and we feel – kinaesthetic
4. Note taking heightens the attention during the seeing and hearing and adds another kind of kinaesthetic input.
5. Subsequent listening and visualizing; the 'dancing in your mind', puts the icing on this particular cake.

Improve Your Capability with a Better Posture



Why is posture so important?

Because the body moves, it rotates and flexes at its best and transfers the forces to and from the ground only when your postural alignment is optimal.

What are you losing by not having proper posture?

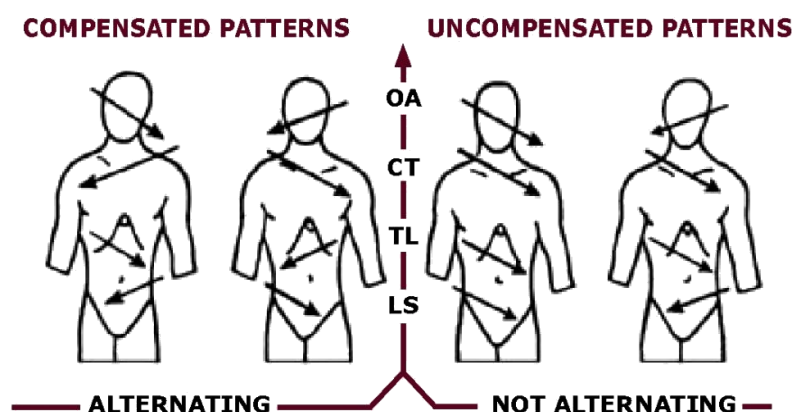
You are subjecting your body to repetitive microtrauma...slowly but surely it is eroding your body with every training session and most of us can get away with it for a while but, it's like taking cash out from a maxed-out credit card.

You could be maximising your results, overall state of health and day to day level of stress by paying some attention to the foundation of performance.

Compensation patterns

Compensation patterns appear when something is off in your technique and may appear due to physical or mental fatigue during your training session but, your body manages, thanks to its intelligence, to still execute the movement.

It sacrifices the correct and optimal combination patterns of muscles in order for you to perform a technique.



Each time you overuse a muscle (like in a compensation pattern) it gets trained and is stronger than the one which should be balancing it.

Dancing is beautifully designed to allow you to move with great efficiency but, there is a paradox...by the time you get to that level of mastery where you move perfectly, you've accumulated a great many compensation patterns!

How to repair compensation patterns

If you don't address your current imbalances because you think you can still perform in spite of them, they will only get worse...and keep in mind that in order to learn a new technique and to perform it well unconsciously, you need between 300 and 500 repetitions.

You can develop compensation patterns doing anything.

For example; during your day to day activities you may have forward head posture due to desk work or looking down on your phone.

There are 3 key points which any professional athlete should know and implement in their practice:

1. **Stretching:** Stretching needs to be done in a scientific manner and in the correct order on well-determined muscle groups to restore optimal alignment of the major joints. This way, it will restore elastic properties to the fascia which binds everything in your body.

If done correctly, it will generate energy due to the piezoelectric effect and consequently, you will have more energy to invest in your training and will waste less energy by keeping muscle tone high in certain facilitated muscles; like your lower back muscles.

In short, you need to identify and stretch the exact muscle groups in order optimize your posture and improve performance.

2. **Breathing mechanics:** Breathing mechanics play a huge role in activating certain muscle groups and bear in mind that breathing is the number one factor in determining your posture. *In fact, your body will sacrifice almost every other body part in order to keep the breathing going therefore, performance greatly improves once you re-train the breathing mechanics.*

In essence, exhalation is coupled with going into the foetal position while inhalation is coupled with the extension or spreading out of the body therefore, by learning how to take in air correctly and tie it in with your specific moves you get more energy in and as a result, you'll increase movement efficiency.



3. Twisting the torso: Twisting your torso has a great effect on your digestive system and a high volume of training can take its toll on the performance.

Bear in mind that visceral health is vital to muscle function and the body will inhibit certain muscles in favour of keeping the organs going since training is catabolic; *meaning it's breaking down your tissue and depleting your energy.*

If the above information seems like the tip of the iceberg, it is, but doing this to your benefit can be easier than you might think.

Something as simple as a 3 minute breathing exercise coupled with gentle mobilization of your lumbar spine in a twisting motion can have a great effect by lowering the effects of stress on your body and improve your energy levels, while at the same time unlocking the next level of performance for you.

You could be optimizing your results, overall state of health and day to day level of stress by paying some attention to the foundation of performance...your posture.