

FROM: Terri Alexander

I don't know how to determine a level on a dance....last night I taught my class my newest choreography "Ladies Choice"(a big thanks to the dancers for being my test group).....I thought I was teaching an easy intermediate dance....I guess I should have said this was intermediate and not easy intermediate. I figured it would take longer to teach - even though there is repetition, it's still a 72 count dance....that means going over it more to get the sequences remembered. It's also a little fast and we all know that any dance that is quick at all feels like 'lightning speed' when you are first learning the steps...speed comes with practice-that doesn't determine the level of a dance. I did find a few areas last night that took more time - a little different step that took going over several times to feel comfortable.....it is REALLY HARD to try to put a level on a dance.....seems like the hardest ones I've learned are almost always just marked intermediate, but the ones marked easy intermediate are usually really easy.....where does one in the middle fall?? LOL Maybe some of those higher intermediate level dances should be marked Advanced - but again that word sometimes scares away people and they won't give it a chance....then we have the variety of levels...the absolute beginner/ ultra beginner/ beginner/ improver/ easy int. /intermediate/ high intermediate/ advanced and sometimes crossover dances that hit both beginner and intermediate levels<<grins>> As a dancer or instructor I understand the question, "How could the choreographer have thought this was a beginner dance?"as a choreographer I can say, "How do I chose the level?". I guess there is no true answer.....there is no guideline that says if a dance has certain elements then it progresses to a certain level.....there is no wheel to spin (wouldn't that be confusing!!).....it's all a matter of personal interpretation. The next time you pick up a step sheet, just imagine a sliding scale with the listed level.....the dance hits somewhere near that!

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NOTE FROM ME: I think this is a great question and I know that different organizations have all kinds of terminology but perhaps, with your input, we can define levels of dances so when choreographers label them and when teachers and students look at them, you will know what you should expect -- especially for the break between beginner and intermediate. I think it would be great to have a list of what steps make the break between beginner and intermediate so that I could add it to my little note that I send as a suggestion to choreographers who submit dances to post and we will also post it on the website under tips for choreographers. I also think there should be an ABSOLUTE beginner category for those classes teaching brand new people to dance because even beginner dances are difficult when you don't know how to dance AT ALL. We've accomplished other things together and I think we could accomplish this so that the levels would be more meaningful to instructors so send me your suggestions and I'll share them with all of you and try to compile a consensus so they will be useful; discuss it with people who have already done a lot of work on this and I'll add whatever we come up with to the SUGGESTIONS FOR CHOREOGRAPHERS on my site. There's some good articles there in case you haven't read them. Perhaps you can send examples of steps that you would consider would fit in the different categories and I'll get them sorted so you can see what the general consensus is. For those of you who are beginners, what steps are giving you the most trouble to do and if you have figured out why they have given you trouble in the past, let us know. Sometimes it's just the way something is taught that makes steps easier to learn and maybe you had a great teacher who just made you "get" it immediately. Tell us how they did it. I hope you will send the NAMES of dances with choreographer of some current dances that you consider examples of these levels to start with

and we can change the categories later if necessary. I know some organizations use novice and newcomer but I don't think those titles mean much to instructors and choreographers, or at least they don't make a picture in my mind of what they are. Here's some suggestions I have but if anyone has something better, I would be happy to share it and see what people think. If you could think about these categories and list under them the moves you would consider for each, it would be a good start to getting everyone on the same track. I really hope those of you who have been teaching for a long time will participate and those of you who have given this a lot of thought and have developed programs for beginners will share your knowledge.

Paula Messier has on her site a little video of the basic steps and tips for beginners if you haven't seen it. I thought this was a great idea and I've sent many beginners to her site to review the steps they have learned in class. Here's the link to her site:

www.countrystarsbypaula.com and then click on TIPS FOR BEGINNERS.

HERE'S WHAT I CAME UP WITH AS CATEGORIES BUT IT'S JUST A GUESS:

ABSOLUTE BEGINNER (never danced before)

EXPERIENCED BEGINNER (This would probably be someone who has completed a six-week session and wants to move on)

BEG/INT

INT

HIGH INTERMEDIATE

ADVANCED

FROM: Sue

I teach around 12 classes a week and my biggest problem was always my beginner classes. One of the hardest things for me personally was recognizing that a beginner dance that was a piece of cake for me was really quite difficult for them. There were many times when I'd try to teach 3 easy dances in a one hour class thinking that if I didn't, they'd be bored. I was so wrong. They want the repetition. They need to go over it and over it so they start to feel confident. I have a repertoire of dances that I now use in all my beginner classes and the variety is enough to keep them stimulated, give them variety and learn different rhythms. I change the music a lot so that they get used to dancing the same dance to a number of songs. I also tend to use a lot more non-country music in my classes as they just enjoy it more and I try to use some music that I can do floor splits with so my beginners can dance while my intermediate/advance dancers are on the floor. It's helped immensely and my beginner dropout rate is almost nil now. In the past year, I've only lost a couple of beginners and after a nine week session, their confidence has blossomed and they're ready for more challenge. Their feet start to know what to do and they've learned a lot of the terminology so pushing up the level is easier.

My dances for beginners include Simply Blue, Stroll Along Cha Cha, La Fiesta, Put On Your Dancing Boots, Rodeo Blues, Come On & Dance (P. Metelnick), Cut a Rug, Dancin' Thing, Dream On, Fallin, I Love A Rainy Night, Sex On The Beach, Playa Latino, So Long I'm Gone, Twix, Start to Sway, Triple J amongst others. They're easy dances, but it's enough variety to get the beginners feeling a little more confident. They get used to jazz boxes, 1/4 and 1/2 turns; they get some different rhythms and some dances that they can do contra. If we don't keep the beginners, we're sunk.

Regarding the various levels, I've had to change how I word my classes. I now teach a brand

new beginner class (level 1), a high beginner/easy intermediate class (level 2) and an intermediate/advanced class (level 3). The word "advanced" throws some people and many feel that they're just not ready to step it up. Sometimes it's not that the level 3 dance is really difficult, it's just that a level 3 class picks it up more quickly. I find too, that a difficult dance is easier for my classes to pick up if they like the music. I understand that totally. If I don't like a song, I don't enjoy learning the dance and it's that much more difficult. Choreographers are obviously within their rights to determine the level of dance, however, no one knows a class better than their instructor, and we have to decide whether a dance marked "beginner" "intermediate" or "advanced" is truly right for their class. I make the final decision for my class whether the dance is beginner, intermediate or advanced, dependent on my classes.

One thing that I do on a regular basis now is hold Saturday morning workshops once or twice a month where I now routinely teach three dances in a 2.5 hour period. They're usually always dances that I would classify as a high intermediate/advanced level dance. It's open to anyone, including my beginners. Some surprise themselves by picking up a dance much faster than they anticipated. It gives me a chance to learn some of the newer ones that I haven't had the chance to teach in a class and it opens it up to any level dance who wants to participate.

I could go on and on.....sorry, this is longer than I wanted it to be! I'm in a love/hate relationship with dances at the moment. I love having so many to choose from.....I hate having so many to choose from. Not only do we sift through all the dances, but listen to the music to decide if we think our classes will like it, then go through and decide if the level is actually what it says it is.

Great topic for discussion though and I'm looking forward to reading other comments.

Sue - Calgary, Alberta

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FROM: fcondron@rogers.com

This is a very good topic. From my experience with my dancers, I find that anything that has coaster steps and sailor shuffles are deemed high intermediate to advanced. I have a short Jive dance which is very easy but ends with a 360 turn and two sailor shuffles and this is what gets them because it is fast and they seem to hesitate on the Sailor Shuffles or simply find it difficult. My advanced people were okay but if I teach it to high beginner, intermediate they are having a hard time with it. Cannot seem to get the turn along with the Sailor Shuffles at all. Coaster Steps also seem to give intermediate a hard time to remember or get into it. Not as bad as Sailor Shuffles but a very good challenge for them. Would not teach it to a beginner. Maybe high intermediate .

Turns also - too many turns and fast - then I teach it to my advanced.

I have a dance which I find easy just a vine left and right, step slide step touch forward twice and then a little right rock step back fast with a touch then a step to the right side and touch and kick ball change with left foot then second kick ball change turn ¼ left with a shuffle (chasse) to the right then left and step half turn. Easy but that little rock step, step touch step touch gives them a really hard time so I have been teaching it to high beginners, intermediate but are having a hard time but are getting it. This is done to Jive Music.

Hope this will help.

Fern Condrón

FROM: Vikki

This is a tricky one because people can pick dances up easier than others. I find that the music can be very fast but the steps are really easy (so in terms of the actual dance it is a beginner dance but in terms of the speed at which it is danced it could be intermediate)

Turns are also a problem, anything more than a half turn for a beginner confuses them (we've all stepped the wrong way), 3/4 turns confuse the best of us until we are used to the dance (so if I see a dance that has a 3/4 turn in it I would assume it was intermediate or higher)

As for advanced dances whilst the dance itself isn't normally too tricky to master (and I know there are some that are just too tricky to master), the music is normally very fast.

Just my opinion of how I decide if they are easy or not.

Vikki

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FROM: Maghi King

I do remember when I first started teaching line dancing (far too long ago for comfort) that one of the lists existing then said that a dance was NOT a beginner dance if:

it had more than 32 counts

it had 3/4 turns (some said more than 1/2 turns)

it involved arms doing more than clapping or clicking fingers

it had any restarts or tags

it didn't count simply: i.e 1, 2& 3, 4& ... as in nightclub would have been disqualified as beginner, as would 8&1 as in cha cha

I think there was more - perhaps others could add to the list?

Maghi

--

Maghi King

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FROM: Lisa

Here's What I Came Up With As Categories But It's Just A Guess:

ABSOLUTE BEGINNER (never danced before)

EXPERIENCED BEGINNER (This would probably be someone who has completed a six-week session and wants to move on)

BEG/INT

INT

HIGH INTERMEDIATE

ADVANCED

This is a good starting point, and I think everybody knows what is meant by "absolute beginner" and "advanced."

Intermediate is kind of a catch-all, but people understand that it's between beginner and advanced.

The worst gray areas are in the transitions from one level to the next.

I would not use the word "experienced" in conjunction with the word "beginner" because it's just too confusing.

I have seen "improver beginner" which is okay but a little awkward. I like "high beginner," which I think implies a beginner who's been at it for a while and has a fair number of dances under his or her belt, perhaps completing a 6-week course, as you said above.

If that seems logical, then by extension the term "intermediate" also could be further defined using "low" and "high."

So that would give us this division:

ABSOLUTE BEGINNER

BEGINNER

HIGH BEGINNER

LOW INTERMEDIATE

INTERMEDIATE

HIGH INTERMEDIATE

ADVANCED

Some will say that it isn't necessary to divide the INTERMEDIATE so much, and I'm okay with that IF we in the dance community come up with workable guidelines like you're trying to do here.

Now the problem is determining how to place dances and dancers in these categories.

Again, I think absolute beginner and advanced take care of themselves.

I suggest that the first skill that must be mastered before progressing from absolute beginner to beginner is syncopation. It's something that takes some people quite a while to understand and to do. If dancers can pick up syncopated steps in a dance, then I would consider them BEGINNER dancers.

Likewise, if a dance has syncopated steps, it should not be considered an absolute beginner dance, even if it only has 16 counts.

More later,

Lisa

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FROM: Cat

I remember reading an article defining levels of dances. Something to the effect of, if it takes less than 5 minutes, it's an absolute beginner dance, less than 10 minutes, a beginner dance, less than 20 minutes an intermediate dance, over 20 minutes would be higher intermediate/advanced. I suppose it would depend on the level of dancer you were teaching as teaching a beginner dance to a class of established intermediate dancers would probably take 2 minutes!

From a personal point of view, having taught absolute beginners through to intermediates, an absolute beginner dance should be less than 32 counts and have strictly NO syncopation in it. Beginner dances, again, preferably no more than 32 counts with the allowance of a small amount of syncopation probably in the form of shuffles, sailors and coasters. Improver dances can go beyond the 32 count with syncopation with shuffles, sailors, coasters, monterey's, easy intermediate dances I would class as up to 64 counts with nothing too complex. I judge it on how long it takes me to learn the dance and how I feel my own class would manage it and how long it would take to teach them the dance. If I go beyond half an hour of teaching my own class a dance, I would judge that dance to be intermediate. Again, it is all down to personal judging with your own class and I like to keep them within their own comfort zone. I am quick to pick up on body language and facial expressions when teaching a dance as to whether or not the particular dance will stick with them or not.

My husband came up with a classic level determination:-

A-B - absolute beginner

B-C - becoming competent (beginner)

C-D comfortable dancer (improver)

D-E definitely educated (intermediate)

E-F etiquette finalised!

Having used Val Myer's absolute beginner programme over the last 6 months, I have become more aware of what the absolute beginner needs. In the first 4 dances of Val's A-B programme, the absolute beginner only ever faces the front wall at the start of each sequence before being introduced to 2 walls and then a gentle approach into 4 wall dances.

Again, I would like to re-iterate that all of the above is from a personal point of view.

Ciao for now, happy dancing.

Cat

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FROM: Lisa

PROBLEMS FOR BEGINNERS:

Full Turns
No more than 32 counts
shuffles
coaster steps
weight changes
half turns with weight change

ABSOLUTE BEGINNER

Step Point
Step Touch
Step Together Step
No hand movements other than clapping
and clicking fingers
stomps
struts

EXPERIENCED BEGINNER

Side together Side
Forward Shuffle
half turn
half turn/half turn
tap

HIGH BEG - LOW INT:

Shuffles
jazz box
easy combinations
grapevine
32 counts
weave

INT:

32 or more counts
Coaster Steps
Shuffle
Sailor Shuffles

INT CONT:

Turn with Sailor Shuffles
Turns
Rock Step with Step Touch
3/4 turns
full turn
monterey turns
easy combinations such as crossover follows by
shuffle steps
crossing shuffle
grapevine
turning grapevine
kick ball change
lock steps
weave with turn

HIGH INT:

more than 32 counts
Coaster steps in combination with other moves
such as a coaster step full turn
Sailor Steps with with turns
full monterey turn
Tag
Restart
8 and 1 cha
syncopated counts (& 1 & 2, etc.)
ball change
coaster back and coaster forward together

ADVANCED:

Fast Music
Syncopated Steps
Arm movements
Tags
Restarts
Full turns (and more)
body rolls

turns with combinations going into and out of
apple jack

In giving a rating for a particular step, the person should designate his or her own level of expertise.

For example, I would call myself a high intermediate dancer. I personally cannot consistently do apple jacks properly, so I would rate them advanced. A dance that includes them would be advanced.

They were kind of hard to get the hang of, but now monterey turns do not faze me so I would rate monterey's intermediate and the same for a dance with monterey turns. Maybe a full monterey would be high intermediate.

In general, I think a lot of the "progressive" choreography by Guyton and Roy Hadisubroto and Scott Blevins should be rated advanced right off the bat because so much of it involves whole body moves.

And I've worked my way around to what may be another cue in determining level of difficulty.
Lisa

HOW WOULD YOU RATE THESE STEPS?

step/touch
basic
vine/grapevine
jazz box/square
toe strut
heel strut
charleston
heel swing
toe fan
hitch
Susie Q
apple jacks
vaudeilles
paddle turn
chenet turn
chase turn
monterey turn
Full Monterey Turn
heel flick
heel hook
slap leather
Hold
Apple Jacks

TRIED AND TRUE BEGINNER DANCES:

Simply Blue,
Stroll Along Cha Cha,
La Fiesta,
Put On Your Dancing Boots,
Rodeo Blues,
Come On & Dance (P. Metelnick),
Cut a Rug,
Dancin' Thing,
Dream On,
Fallin,
I Love A Rainy Night,
Sex On The Beach,
Playa Latino,
So Long I'm Gone,
Twix,
Start to Sway,
Triple J
Just because, Jo Thompson