

Skill-Building for Dance Promotion: How to Create Good Instructional Dance Videos

by Don Bell

If you are a dance choreographer and launch a new dance, your goal is to present it in the best light and to the widest audience possible. Traditionally, you would seek to have a new dance debuted at a high-profile event with an excellent caller, terrific band, and great dancers. After that, you would promote the dance by providing paper copies upon request and perhaps by publishing it in the *CDSS News*. Once you have created enough dances to make it worthwhile, you might assemble a book of dances (perhaps with an associated CD) and make it available through the CDSS online store.

While it's still valuable for choreographers to publish collections of their dances in print form, the ideal way these days to disseminate individual dances is to publish them on the web. The old way of doing things worked well when that was all we had. Today, however, modern technology provides the means to broadcast dances to a much larger audience. But here's a caveat—if you as a choreographer want to give your dances the optimal chance of thriving, you should be the first to release your new creations on the web with an accompanying video. That way you'll have the first crack at forming people's impressions of the dance. As J.K. Rowling says, "*A good first impression can work wonders.*"

Here are some particular benefits of the electronic approach to publishing dances:

- videos provide an immediate sense of what a dance is like (trying to convey the exact feel of a dance in writing is virtually impossible)
- YouTube and similar platforms are free and readily accessible from a personal computer
- online publishing platforms are easy-to-use and relatively quick (compared to creating a book)
- with online videos, everything about the dance can be compiled in one place – video, recorded music, score, and dance instructions – making it much easier for people to learn new dances; and
- good videos are a great way to promote dances and to inspire people to join in the fun. (About 20



A shot from a video of the dance "Sleeping in the Attic," by Philippe Callens. Published by Maria Boet of the Country Dance Society, Boston Centre, Dec 2017.

years ago—actually before the advent of YouTube—I showed a video of the Hartford Ball to some prospective English Country dancers. Inspired by what they saw, they became avid ball attendees and to this day run their own regular ball prep workshops for experienced dancers)

Now imagine you're a dancer about to attend a special dance or ball and want to learn how to do an unfamiliar dance that is on the program. Or you're a caller who'd like to teach a new dance. You search the web and discover several videos but none are really good at helping you learn the dance. This can be very disappointing and frustrating. Unfortunately, this seems to be an all too common experience. If you browse the Lambertville ECD video database for dances, you'll find that not many dances earn a "Good for Learning" approval rating.

What would a good instructional dance video look like?

- experienced dancers dancing well with enthusiasm to high quality music
- well-lit, in-focus, full-body shots of dancers in one set
- video clips of whole rounds of the dance done by one set that make it easy to see and learn the complete sequence of figures in a dance

- quality audio for the music and calls
- a concise, edited video showing just a few rounds of the best dancing with smooth transitions
- credits showing all the relevant dance information including the caller instructions and tune.

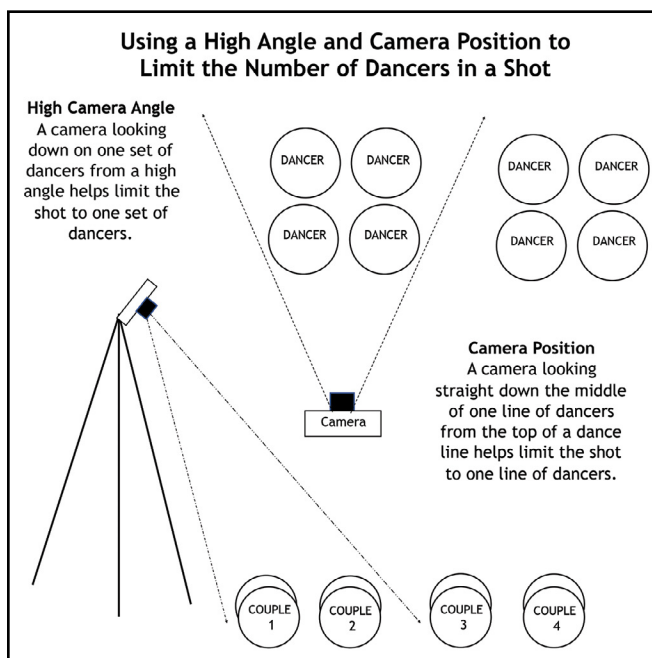
Here are my suggestions to dance videographers for creating dance videos that are really “good for learning.”

Use an Appropriate Camera

A good camera for dance videographers has four key components: ability to shoot in HD (high-definition video), a wide-angle lens, sensitivity to low light levels and a downwardly tiltable display/viewfinder. A wide-angle lens allows you to position yourself close to the dancers but still get the whole set of dancers in the shot. Sensitivity to low-light levels makes it possible to shoot high-quality video in dimly lit dance venues. A camera with these two components gives you a greater depth of field (the zone of sharpness within a photo) which means your images will be pleasingly crisp. A display/viewfinder that can be tilted downwards allows you to see what the camera sees, even when the camera is high above your head.

Use a Tripod or Monopod to Ensure Image Stability

To ensure your camera records a stable image, attach your camera to a tripod or monopod. In cramped situations, a monopod works much better than a tripod. You can easily



move to the best camera position and angle with minimal disturbance to others. I’ve been using a Magnus VT-350 Video Tripod (because of its extra height - 82”) and a Giotto’s Memoire 100 monopod (because it can be used as a tripod/monopod, selfie-stick, or even a trekking pole).

Be an Active Camera Person But Not Too Active

To create a good instructional dance video, you need to keep the camera tightly focused on one set of dancers. This requires that you actively monitor the camera’s viewfinder and, when necessary, make minor adjustments to keep the set in the middle of the frame. But don’t be too active. Avoid panning, tilting, zooming and moving camera shots. They can distract from watching the dancers and dance figures. As the dancers are moving the camera doesn’t need to move. Only use zoom to frame the next group of dancers you are following.

Select the Best Camera Position and Angle

The most important decision you make as a dance videographer is where to place the camera. Select a line with the most proficient dancers, if possible, and position your camera at the top of the line looking straight down the center or a little to one side. I prefer looking straight down the center as it gives you occasional glimpses of beautiful synchronicity when all the dancers in the line are moving in unison - forwards, backwards or turning in the center.

A high angle shot helps the viewer see the dance patterns more clearly, so shoot from 7-10 feet above the dance floor pointing the camera slightly down on one set of dancers. Don’t, however, shoot from a high bird’s eye view of the dance because the shot will lose the instructional focus on one set of dancers and look more 2D than 3D. You can achieve a high angle with a tall tripod (e.g., 82”) or by standing on a stage, table or chair. If you are using a monopod or selfie-stick, you can simply raise the camera in the air and brace your arms and body against a wall or fixed object.

Focus on One Set of Dancers and Avoid Distracting Images

While it’s lovely to get a sense of all the dancers in a line moving in sync, your main goal is to produce the best possible instructional video. To do this, you need to concentrate on one set of dancers at the top of a line as they complete one round of the dance.

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Always go for full-body shots of the dancers and keep distractions out of the frame. Avoid closeups and cutaways of dancers' hands, feet and heads. And stay away from shots that include the caller, the band, dancers in other sets, non-dancers, equipment, and, of course, visual obstructions.

Record Quality Sound

A clear recording of the music and caller's prompts adds a lot of value to a dance video. If your camera is located close enough to the band, caller, and speakers, you can usually get acceptable audio from your camera's built-in microphone.

It's possible to get much higher-quality audio from a remote microphone. While the camera's built-in microphone is usually pointed at the dancers, a remote microphone can be placed in a better recording position near the caller and band. To get the best possible sound, you can try to get a line feed from the sound system to your camera or a digital recording device. This requires getting the permission of the band, the caller and the sound person. Provided there is a good sound mix, you will get good quality sound without undesirable background noise. If you want to include some sounds from the dance floor (e.g., hand-clapping), you can mix the two sound tracks together in your video editor.

If the dance was done to recorded music, you can replace or augment the camera's sound track with the higher quality music recording in your video editing program. If you want some of the calls, you can mix the two tracks.

Collect Information for the Credits

Viewers (especially callers) will appreciate getting all the information they need in one place (i.e., a YouTube video). In the credits include: the name of the dance, the tune and composer (when known), the event and its date, the caller, the band, and the venue. If you have permission from the choreographers and composers, include copies of the tune and dance instructions and/or references to how they may be obtained. If available, a little history of the dance is an added plus. And finally, photos of the venue, the caller and the band impart a nice sense of context.

Edit Your Video

How you edit your video can make or break it. Good editing can salvage a mediocre video by highlighting just

the best dance sequences and removing dancer mistakes and distracting images or sounds. Lack of editing can limit the appeal of a well shot video.

When you video a dance, try to capture the whole thing from the band's intro at the beginning to the applause at the end. This way you'll have plenty of material to work with when you start to edit the video. For the final version, your aim will be to reduce the material down to 2-3 rounds of the dance for 2-3 minutes. This is usually sufficient for the viewer to learn the dance.

Show whole rounds of the dance with the best dancing. Edit out walk-throughs, couples standing out at the top of a line, dancer mistakes, and distracting images or sounds. Create smooth visual and audio transitions between scenes. Try to run at least the first round of the dance with calls. After that, it's often better to let the viewer enjoy the dancing and music without the calls. If images are a little dark, you can use video editing software to make them a little brighter. There are also video tools on the YouTube web site that can help correct problems with lighting and image stability.

Whenever you use audio not recorded by your camera, you'll need to precisely match that audio to the video of the dancers' movements. As this is hard to do manually, it's best if your video editing program can do it for you by syncing the non-camera audio track with the camera's audio track.

Learn More About Shooting & Editing Video

To learn more about shooting and editing video, watch online tutorials and take courses at your local arts center or community college. Experiment with different camera settings, shot angles, editing techniques, sound recording methods. After you finish editing a video, ask yourself "What did I learn this time?" Watch other ECD dance videos. What did you like or dislike about them? What new techniques can you apply to your videos to make them better? Once you've learned some basic skills, you'll find it's fun to create videos that you and other dancers enjoy watching.

Don Bell has a background in educational television, educational technology and multimedia. He and his wife Diane (whom he met at Pinewoods) have been running an English Country dance series in Troy, NY since 1994.

WEB EXTRA: Watch Don Bell's English country dance videos on his YouTube channel: [youtube.com/user/donwfbell/videos](https://www.youtube.com/user/donwfbell/videos)