

Ask Diane “My Student Has No Rhythm” January 28, 2009

Dear Diane,

I've always said I could teach anyone to dance. Now, I'm not so sure.

I have a student who cannot hear the beat. More specifically, he can't dance and hear the beat correctly at the same time. What's worse, he seems to have even less rhythm now than when he started taking private lessons with me a year ago.

It's getting very hard to teach him anything new, because each new element I introduce erodes his sense of timing even further. It's impossible to dance through a three minute song on time unless I back lead him through the entire piece, which I don't believe is good teaching.

I know it's embarrassing for my student when I stop him after every few bars, but I feel I can't ignore this most basic problem. My student has mentioned that he would like to compete someday, but that's not even on the horizon right now.

He is a kind person, but I'm at my wits end. Please help me to help my student.

Sincerely,

Frustrated in Colorado

Dear Frustrated,

Thank you for bringing up this excellent issue. It can be very daunting to teach a student who seems to have no rhythm.

There are many reasons why students have difficulty dancing on time. Sometimes they just have no music background. They have no musical training, and grew up in homes where music was not played or listened to with any frequency. Sometimes students who do have a background in music have a hard time with a new type of music (Salsa, for example), where it can be tricky to find the “1”.

It's very common to discover that students cannot stay on time when they are thinking about something else (the footwork, the lead, the couple in front of them blocking the line of dance, etc.) I believe this is happening with your student, since you mention that his timing gets worse with each new element you introduce.

The key now is to remove all distractions and pare your lessons down to the bare basics. At the beginning, you will focus only on the music. Select a piece of music with an obvious and insistent beat. Have your student listen to the music, and when he believes he can find the beat, have him tap a pencil or his fingers to the beat. You can do this in a

private studio or sitting at a table with an iPod between you. Correct him if he starts tapping off time.

Stay with this exercise until he can find and remain on the beat for the entire song. Now repeat the exercise, trying to find the “1”, which he can emphasize with a larger down stroke of the pencil. If he is struggling, help him to focus and concentrate. He should try to be present with the music and to stay with the music. This may take the whole lesson.

Eventually, you can begin to dance to the music, but again—pare everything down to the basics. Choose the simplest step (i.e. Box step in Rumba) and have him walk through it, saying the correct timing. He doesn't need to worry about foot work, hip action, or anything other than taking his steps on time with the music. Start the song, and have him begin. If he goes off time, stop and discuss what distracted him, then begin again. Keep with the simple Box step until he can walk through an entire song with the music. If you feel he's ready, have him dance the Box step with a partner.

It takes discipline to go this slowly with a student who's been dancing for a year. But it is so worth it! The greatest gift you can give to your student is the time and the patience to discover his own musicality, because this is what will eventually bring him the true joy of ballroom dancing. And, for that very rare student who may never dance on time—as long as he is enjoying himself and is considerate of his partner—it's not the worst thing in the world.

Good luck! I know that both you and your student are up to this challenge. Let me know how things work out.

Warm Regards,

Diane

Diane Jarmolow welcomes your questions and comments. She is available for consultation on a wide range of issues involving dance teacher training, BDTC-in-a-Box, studio management, and studio culture. You can visit her web site at www.teachballroomdancing.com, and can contact her at diane@teachballroomdancing.com.