

THE COTSWOLD MORRIS WORKSHOP

INTRODUCTION

Quite often the dancer called upon to run a short Cotswold Morris workshop at a Festival or on a course has had little experience of teaching movement or of teaching people, and this lack can be complicated by a common failure to recognise that a public workshop is fundamentally different from a typical club practice, in that all aspects have to be covered in the one occasion. There is also the disadvantage that one is unlikely to know anyone present closely. But the attendees at a workshop have paid and have an expectation both to learn and to enjoy the relatively brief instructional. The following advice draws on 20 years of experience to present an example of what appears to be a successful approach to the task.

If the workshop is with beginners they need not be underestimated. They should be expected to be prepared for it to be difficult, so the leader's task is primarily to present the dancing clearly. The range of difficulty over the traditions is not great to the uninitiated. The problem is to the presenter in getting it over. Choosing something "easy" and letting it become a romp is a disservice to the morris. It has been found practical to teach the complexities of the Sherborne tradition to people with no preconceptions of dancing the morris. The converse is also true, dancers who may be quite confident and competent at their practiced traditions can still act like inexperienced ones when faced with something new, and might even have more difficulty than a newcomer to the morris because it is different.

That a tradition has been worked up in a club is not necessarily an adequate basis for a good workshop unless that is the specific objective, and, the teacher both understands what has been done in the club and can be articulate about it. Naturally when well done the exposition of the insights obtained is fascinating to all. All the same, the leader should have considerable familiarity with the chosen tradition, not just picking it out from a book because of the desire to avoid their own team's dances. It is a common courtesy to explain to the group the background to what is going to be done, whether it is based on someone's teaching, a club's performance, a personal interpretation or a development of ideas, otherwise what is done will be of little use to the recipients afterwards because it can not be related to their experience of other teachings.

Workshops need skills, knowledge and preparation.

PREPARATION

Not surprisingly there are a number of things to think about before the workshop starts that are easily overlooked.

1. If the workshop is going to need sticks, ensure that a supply is going to exist, even if you or an organiser has to go out into the local countryside with a saw.
2. You need a musician. They will probably like to know what is expected in the way of tunes and an indication of your proposed method of working. If a full range of a tradition's tunes are needed they may need to be learnt although the musician will still have to adapt them to your as yet unknown needs on the day. Otherwise the musician must combine the skills of being able to read music and follow you simultaneously. The precise melody line is less important than the correct phrasing. The speed that you will want is probably the most important facet to agree beforehand.
3. Good dancing needs good music and this is especially valuable at a workshop. This does mean not accepting any odd musician, and making it clear at the start that bands are not acceptable out of consideration for the dancers, as they obscure the rhythm, the phrasing and the critical fitting of the music to the movements of the dance by the official musician. If you need volume, it should be obtained by amplification not by numbers of instruments. Dance workshops really are not the place

for inexperienced musicians to learn tunes or to pick up style. You can tell when they are inexperienced, because they will believe that playing is a good idea and will not understand your reasons for saying it is not.

4. Microphones may be essential to handle a large crowd, but their use needs a special technique which has to be worked out beforehand. Also you may have to modify your normal approach to overcome the problem of being rooted to one spot and to meet the difficulties of moving larger masses of humanity. Having experience as a social dancer caller can help in giving confidence in handling people, but the much greater degree of technical detail required for the morris leads to the need for a different approach to its teaching.
5. The venue itself may cause problems. If the floor is unsprung, it will be hard on the balls of the feet, so that dancers will not spring around for long or appear to be lively. The acoustics will affect who can hear and how well they can dance to the music. You have to understand the place's acoustics before the start, or the dancers will lose those all important first few speeches before your delivery becomes generally intelligible. Learn to speak slower than in normal conversation, relax the throat muscles between words to avoid getting hoarse, and do not use too many words to pad out the explanations, no matter how much you like to hear the sound of your own voice.
6. The preparation of some background material on the tradition to present during the workshop will help enliven the occasion.

POLICY IN THE WORKSHOP

Any method followed must be based on synthesis, building up from the elements, as the average dancer does not have the developed skills to learn from the top down by mimicing a total demonstration as can professional actors or dancers.

Implied in most of this advice is that it is a single tradition workshop. This is not absolutely essential. However each tradition has a peak intensity in its teaching and multiple presentations are very challenging if the dancers are not to leave confused at the end of the workshop.

Each tradition needs its own approach, depending on the relative importance to be given to the basic movements, the complexity of the figures or the variety of the "steps". However it is important to start with basics, meaning the posture, the jumps and the plain stepping that go with the tradition under examination.

The attendees, many of whom have never met or heard you speak before, need the opportunity to get used to your voice, mannerisms and the technical jargon, which can be quite confusing at first. Therefore having introduced yourself, talk for example about posture, balance, the feet turning out, stepping sequences rather than individual steps, and the technique needed in jumps and plain capers. Any emphasis on basics is never wasted and this allows the dancers to become attentive and builds up the group experience that allows them to work together later. Speak clearly, in an interested sounding voice, that is, be warm, relaxed and not harsh.

One could start with a stick dance, but few Cotswold traditions have such and it is an essential point that it is a handkerchief tradition. It is worth emphasising to the group that the morris handkerchief is of neckerchief size, not men's pocket hanky, being a full half yard on a side before hemming, not a foot. The size and weight of the traditional piece has a significant effect on the character of the dance. The additional complexity coming from carrying a stick should be faced later. Beginners especially are usually dreadful at handling a stick, on their first meeting with the morris, when not clashing it, as they do not know what to do with their arms and legs, let alone the stick. Do not confuse the ease with which a stick dance can be done after a little experience with those first few minutes when all is novel. Do not think either that

because a simple stick dance is apparently rhythmic and fun that everything else is eased. It could be losing some of the progress already made through allowing some laxity in the other basics.

The essential aim is to build steadily, not overburdening learning at any stage, and in such an order that bad habits are not generated by letting dancers "fill-in" for the things not yet explained, for example hand movements. Dancers should only be expected to think explicitly about one thing at a time, so "habit" patterns must be built up to carry those things that have to be remembered throughout. It is impractical to expect everyone to remember everything and keep it all in practice through the workshop. The instructor may have to salve their conscience by saying clearly, at least once, all the things that have to be said.

Gaps in the teaching, especially early on for rests, are dangerous both in allowing attention to relax and in letting other matters come into conversation. The availability of drinks in a short workshop can also be disruptive to progress. One must capture the attention and hold it. Talk through a rest and do not let the attendees physically or mentally wander. This is one occasion for the use of background material. Judging the pace in a workshop is important and momentum must not be lost by too long a gap in the dancing, by too little recapitulation allowing the growth of confusion or by too little control of the spread of bad habits in the dancing. The leader should have the equivalent of a "script" or plan to work from, but of course they must also be prepared to modify the content by watching the dancers, all of them. It is a good trick to watch their faces for their reactions. This has to be a conscious effort as normal social conventions limit the amount of "eye contact" between people who are interacting in a face-to-face situation.

The teacher should have analysed beforehand what is to be taught to ensure that there are no hidden problems. As an example, when teaching basic stepping, do not start the dancers from a "feet together" because the very first movement must then be untypical, as somehow a foot must be raised to put it immediately back onto the ground. Putting too much detail in at the start can also be counter productive, as long as it does not mean that something would have to be unlearnt later. The trimmings, like any flicks of the handkerchiefs with the arm movements, or variety in phrase endings etc, can be picked up on a reprise.

Never suggest that anything is other than the instructor's fault.

FORMAT OF THE WORKSHOP

There are two approaches to presenting a tradition. The first to be described is that which has been used most frequently, because it fits to the majority of my teaching engagements. Another method is discussed later, as are the particular problems of working with unusual groups.

I start with the basic four bar stepping sequence where possible, of say two double steps, backsteps and a jump, rather than working on the individual steps separately. It seems especially important to get the dancers to think in "sequences" and to build up these as habit patterns, rather than trying to construct the sequence from its component parts, at the stage of the workshop when they are having difficulties with everything. The stepping sequence needs linking with the arm and handkerchief movements as soon as practical to gain the essential balance of the body to help in dancing and expression. It is this basic step and arm sequence that must become automatic early on in the workshop.

The leader must recognise that there are technical difficulties and that they must not be hidden from the dancers or skated around or any easy alternative found. It is wrong to devalue the tradition. Peter Kennedy once said that the EFDSS considered inventing a beginners tradition for public workshops so that the more complex "real" ones could be worked at at more leisure in a club atmosphere. It was not followed up as it was realised that something important of the morris could be lost. But the modern reconstructions of the Ducklington, Stanton Harcourt and Wheatley traditions were kept simple with this use in mind.

The easiest way to reinforce the basic sequence is to learn the figures (CF = common figures) that use the basic sequence without confusing the issue with choruses (DF = distinctive figures). Those figures where the stepping is different, for example having a galley instead of a backstep, can be learnt next. It is found that building up a dance figure by figure with the choruses in between is overall slower, because of the greater variety of steps and movements usually introduced and so having to be remembered and practiced together. Even without the choruses many dance skills can be encouraged and suitable technical points made.

By now you have had to introduce the idea of a set of dancers, usually six in number and arranged in two lines. Many workshop venues are too cramped to allow the full space for a set with everyone up, but it must be pointed out that the usual size is finger-tip to finger-tip separation both along and across the set. This not only neatly copes with various sized people or different age groups, but indicates what is sufficient room for figures and for working with one's opposite in choruses. The instructor should give some thought as to how the number of sets formed should be arranged for mutual visibility. It must be remembered when demonstrating that facing the dancers makes you a mirror image of what you want them to do and that some people will only be able to visualise their own actions if they see you facing the same way as they are. Of course you then can not see their progress or problems!

Do not worry about very large numbers of dancers because they will expect you to take longer to organise them. Unfortunately with large numbers it is not so easy to stop everything for the odd dancer or set going wrong and you may have to store the necessary comment or advice or recap of what they missed until the end of the particular exercise being danced. The danger to the instructor is in just following a few of the sets rather than looking around for the problems. It is all too easy to "prompt call" based on a set doing well. It is no disgrace of course in such situations to have a few stewards to assist you. I do find that in small workshops I do give more attention to the set with the local squire or foreman or workshop organiser in it, on the assumption that they are the ones who have to get the most out of the occasion.

The figures can be assembled in stages, walking through, stepping through, perhaps in slow time without music with you calling the steps in sequence. The value of having learnt the step sequences earlier will soon be apparent. One aim is to build up the dancer's awareness of where the opposite dancer and the others should be. Few new dancers have any experience of dancing in a team and there are a number of points that will have to be made several times during the workshop about working together. Keeping the "lines straight" is one such, there comes an automatic "set consciousness" for experienced dancers, but others will benefit from the suggestions on who should be watching the lines or adjusting position. Comment can be made, for example, about the length of the steps, the matching of the surge forward on the strong beat, on how much forward movement there should be off a jump into the next figure, so that the workshop is aware of the points and can use them to dance together. The danger in aiming for set cohesion is that it must be some sort of compromise, possibly expressing the lowest common denominator of the set's dancing ability.

There is no doubt that some things can be left to look after themselves, but, in general, drawing conscious attention to some point makes its achievement and retention much more likely. Attention should be drawn to "space" and the need to be aware of how it changes during figures, for example rounds, perhaps by walking dancers through it slowly with attention on the relative spacings rather than on the steps, so that the shape can be preserved in the full speed movement.

Remember also that figures feel different from the various places in a set so there is the possibility and desirability of moving dancers around during the workshop if they look as if they can cope with it. The move can be used as an excuse for a recap of a movement without losing the pace of the workshop. Some clubs like to move dancers around frequently in their practices so that they are not wedded to one position.

Just like a social dance caller, it is necessary to be able to prompt call at the right moments during the dance, not so far ahead of the new movement that the dancers break into it too early or that they forget what you have said before they get to it, nor too late for them to actually think what it is that you mean. Somewhere about the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th bar is about right. Think out the key words to be used so that they are effective reminders, and do not ad lib too much as it will just be verbiage and distracting during the dancing. Dancers with some experience will know a jargon which may not be yours, so avoid slipping into a short hand too soon.

When one gets into dances, these continue to practice all the figures and the constant repetition of them in each dance helps to fix them further. Getting the choruses correct is not so important as they seldom include key elements of the tradition, except for the sidesteps and the slow capers. As confidence builds on the floor it is possible to return to the figures and improve them. For example, the size of the loops in the hey can be changed so that the other dancers have the time and the space to get round. This does matter if the tradition has the half movement done in two bars so that the other two bars can be danced facing one's opposite. It is probably the heys that evolve away the most from what is first taught.

In fairness to the dancers it is desirable to start on dances with standard structures such as the universal sidestep-and-half-hey-repeated chorus. These are the "whole set" dances in which all dancers are moving all the time. Then possibly it would be wise to do the stick dances before embarking on dances with abnormal structures or which include the slow capers. Slow capers are not difficult to do and they are easy to teach if emphasis is given to clear presentation, to balance, and to where the "effort" in the series of movements is supposed to be put. As with all teaching, it is important to be clear on all the details and not to forget to mention key points at the right time.

WORKSHOP TIMING

It is my experience that a workshop as short as one hour or less or as long as two hours or more is difficult to programme and give the attendees satisfaction, unless they are quite expert and are being given a polish. About 1½ hours seems ideal to me for introducing a single Cotswold tradition. It should take about half an hour to get the first complete dance going to a modest standard. It should take another hour to give a fairly comprehensive presentation of the rest of the tradition. If the workshop goes on for more than 1½ hours, then one starts a reprise of dances done. At the end it is helpful to run through, perhaps briefly, the key points made during the workshop and to note the special characteristics of the tradition. Finally it makes for good will if you can stop on and talk afterwards, perhaps going through a notation with someone. I can not recommend the spending of most of a workshop on one or two dances so that they appear to have been learnt thoroughly, unless the sets are nearly all drawn from particular clubs so that the dance has been learnt as a club rather than by the individual who then has to take it back. It is my experience that no matter how well a dance seems to go at first teaching, it is not learnt until the dancers have gone through it a number of times at successive club practices.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

As said earlier, each tradition needs its own approach. Some do not have much variety in the range of extant dances. One way is to accumulate dances from sides that have been created in that "tradition", although this is not always acceptable in a public workshop presenting traditional dancing. Another way is to concentrate on the distinctive style of the traditional movements at the start. By beginning with jigs the problem of mixing personal movement awareness with a spatial awareness of others is postponed till some skill in control of one's body is achieved. It can minimise self consciousness and maximise confidence. The traditions from Bucknell and Sherborne suit this method. A key must be in being a rather skilful dancer in order to demonstrate the movement elements.

An occasional engagement is the teaching of a dance or two to an adult organisation or at a school, as part of a talk or a folk related event, where there is little possibility of a follow up. The group, whether helped by regular dancers or not, will recognise that it is being given something simple or simplified, but seldom wants a challenge. This is a case where fun is more important than accuracy. Success can be obtained by the inverse of what has been recommended for formal workshops, starting with a stick or handclapping dance and learning the chorus first as a rock around which to build the rest.

Children are often very good mimics and one should start by trying demonstrating movements without too much explanation. The morris can be too challenging for small children. Remember that children are used to a particular way of being taught from school and to a short time per session.

PROBLEMS

1. It is frustrating to see dancers forgetting or even apparently not trying to do what is asked. Sometimes they have already learnt it before differently, they may not even recognise your teaching as different, and perhaps they are not going to change just for you, not even as a courtesy to the other dancers. One must never lose one's temper or shout or take issue. Simply state at the beginning of the workshop the basis for the teaching and request cooperation from the experienced dancers. If it is an interpretation or in some way not the strictest orthodoxy, you ask the dancers to try it and allow them the privilege of rejecting it all if they wish, but after the workshop, not during it. In the morris world as it is, the final arbiter on what is done in public is the club, not the workshop instructor, and they are at liberty to change everything later if they chose to use anything of what you have taught.
2. It is difficult for the instructor to remember the problems of actually being a beginner. They are uncoordinated, unused to moving relative to other people or to listening, either to you or to the music. The work in the class should be intensive, but aimed at enjoyment, so as not to kill further interest. Beginners try to exercise control by rigidity of limbs, stiffening all their muscles, and jerky not rhythmic movement results and it is very tiring. Further it does not allow proper balance in jumps, especially when a turn is required as well. The classes may need loosening up right at the start of the workshop. Practice jumps, teach "spotting" in turns and emphasise that the head and arms should be steady in a turn and not jerked or snatched as the dancer will lose balance.
3. In the bustle and confusion people are not all that clear on which is their right or left, particularly with regard to turns, so do not be afraid to push or help them round. Their mental block is in translating your words into movement and the push can short circuit the problem for them. The English avoid physical contact with strangers, but in the workshop you are sharing yourself and bulding up an intimacy.
4. The mix of ability in the workshop is quickly recognised but can not be planned for, nor is it easy when dancers are in mufti to know if they have common origins. One has to be aware that it may be better to let the dancers form up with people they know, or people of their own standard. However poor dancers tend to get up late, hide in corners and sometimes desperately need to be spread around and helped by the more experienced. Usually beginners welcome being able to practice along with experienced dancers.
5. Working against you always is the feeling dancers get for a consensus within a set so that dancing together dominates over doing what you have asked. Sometimes you can see a deviation spread around the workshop from set to set, if it starts being done confidently by one set. Of course the group feeling for dance is actually what one wants cultivated - except in your workshop! But it is what they finally dance together that they remember and take back to their clubs, not what you have so carefully coached. It comes as a suprise the first time you are quoted as being the authentic source for their oddities!

6. The allowing or encouraging of the wearing of bells is a difficult decision, even though the sound is essential to the morris and enhances good dancing, because the noise cuts across the instruction. Modern bells jangle, not at all like the 19th century musical tinkles, and people do fidget. On the whole bells encourage a trend to average dancing rather than to steadily improving one's dancing. It would be nice if some logical way could be found to introduce bells some way through the workshop.

ACHIEVEMENT

I think that the way to judge the success of a workshop is to listen to the degree of togetherness, rhythm and phrasing that can be heard in the dancing by the end of the session.

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