

Building a Successful Tango Community

by Clay Nelson, 1998

Three indicators of a successful tango community are its **quantity, quality** and **cooperation**. Although many of the factors which affect these indicators are “interlinked”, let’s attempt to take a look at each of them separately.

I. Quantity: Obviously, there needs to be a critical mass of dancers for a community be considered a success. Your first job, then, is to get new people in, and keep existing dancers from dropping out.

A. Recruiting.

1. Classes. Clearly there needs to be classes. But where, when and who teachers them? The best opportunities for holding classes are at community centers, city park districts, colleges and universities. The reason these are the best is because they already have the venues, existing client base, and will usually do the advertising and promoting for you. Existing dance studios are also a possibility, but most likely you will have to twist their arms and do all your own promoting. Typically a group class series will be in the evening, run 4-8 weeks, and my favorite nights (in order of preference) are Friday, Tuesday, Thursday, Monday and Wednesday. At the start of each series, be sure to hand out a printed weekly or monthly calendar of all tango events in your community, and for the absolute beginner’s class hand out a printed free invitation (with time, date, location) to your local milongas or practicas.

2. Teachers. The next tricky question is who should teach? The answer is...**you**, along with everyone of your friends, neighbors, and acquaintances that knows the least thing at all about tango! I know this is contrary to everything you've heard and thought about tango, but tango is a folk dance and should be shared and taught by everyone. That's the way it originated, and that's the way it will promulgate. This is not rocket surgery, my friend, and the idea is to have fun and enjoy. Remember, everyone of those people that your neighbor, relative, and clumsy former student starts teaching is one more body brought into the tango community—and probably a body that would never have been there otherwise. Furthermore, once they see you dance and hear what a superior teacher you are, they will all end up as your student anyway.

3. Advertising. Personally, I find traditional advertising to be a waste of money. However, most cities and neighborhood newspapers have a free public service calendar in which you can place a short notice of your lessons, practicas and milongas. Depending on the city and location, putting up flyers on community bulletin boards can be very effective.

B. Minimizing Attrition.

1. Weekly (or Monthly) Milongas. Milongas are the reason d'être. Without them, there's no motive to learn tango. Unless, of course, all you want to do is perform—but that’s another bag and although a good performance will win a few converts, tango performances alone will not sustain a healthy tango community. In fact, it will mostly just attract egocentric dancers. If possible, the venue for a weekly milonga should be at a public place (restaurant, park, coffee shop, etc). This is for two reasons. First, it introduces tango to the unsuspecting public. Second, people generally have a lot of

pride and like to show off their tango dancing skills. Always include a free lesson at the start of each milonga.

2. Music. You just have to have a good music. Putting a stack of tango CD's on and hitting the random button doesn't cut it. If your community is new, it will take time for good tango DJ's to develop. In the meantime, do your best, educate yourself, and play what you think is good tango dance music. (More on this in the next paragraph). Also, you must play tandas and cortinas (3 songs at most for beginners)—but not necessarily at the practicas.

3. Dancing Style. OK, you're not all going to agree with me on this one. From many years of organizing tango festivals, from many years of observing and attending other peoples tango communities and festivals, and from many visits to Buenos Aires, it is my belief and observation that to have a successful community you must promote and develop a community that is absolutely, insanely and madly in love with dancing close embrace tango to 30's, 40's and 50's golden age traditional music—not because that is what I love the most, but because it is the linkage between this style of dancing and this particular music that makes tango so addictive. Furthermore, I base this claim on my experience as a former dance studio owner and teacher of a dozen different ballroom dances—none of which can compare nor compete with the emotional passion, connection, and exuberance one experiences from improvisational close embrace tango.

4. Weekly Practicas. People want and need to practice in an inclusive, inviting and non-threatening location—nuff said.

II. Quality: Next you want to develop good dancers.

A. Weekend Festivals with Guest Teacher(s). Yes, but be careful! They can be expensive, exhausting, and time consuming to plan. In tango especially, the best dancers are not necessarily the best teachers. Although a great dancer can wow and win new converts with their performances, they can also ruin a community with bad teaching—not necessarily because they have bad teaching methods, but because they teach the wrong material. (See next paragraph.)

B. 8-count basic (or more accurately, 8-step basic--since it's practically never 8 counts of the music). Unfortunately, many teachers still teach an 8-count basic. Yes, the 8-count has some great stuff in it, but here's 8 reasons not to teach it: (1) it's difficult for beginner's to execute correctly, (2) it misleads couples into thinking they know how to dance tango, (3) it doesn't encourage good lead and follow, (4) it stifles improvisation, (5) it causes beginners to drift to the center of the floor, (6) it's useless in a crowded milonga, (7) it stifles musicality, and (8) it's essentially never used by good social dancers in the milongas! Then why is it taught? The answer is laziness, ignorance, and tradition. (One of my favorite stories is about an excellent follower from Portland who was taking a tango class in England. The teacher asked her to do the 8-count basic pattern alone without a partner. She answered that she didn't know how. The teacher then said, "what are they teaching you in Portland?!" Her answer was simple and perfect... **"to follow!"**)

C. Basic Vocabulary. So if not the "8-count", then what should be taught? I suggest basic vocabulary such as walking, marking time, check left turn, rock steps, walking outside your partner, crusada, side steps, etc. Being able to lead/follow these basic elements will enhance

beginner's navigation and improvisational skills and will allow them to dance on a crowded floor.

D. Getting Good Guest Teachers. Here are three ways to find good teachers: (a) look at the web sites and pick teachers from communities that have renown tango communities (Portland, Ann Arbor, Atlanta, San Francisco, Denver, Seattle, etc), (b) check out the web sites of successful tango festivals and look for who's been teaching there ([click here](#) for a list of teachers that have previously taught at my festivals), (c) ask around.

E. Bad Teachers. But you said everyone should teach and obviously some of these people will be really bad instructors and teach bad habits. Yes, it's true, but consider this: (1) all of us learned some bad habits that we had to fix later, (2) all these students with bad habits will provide an eager and waiting clientele for your classes, and (3) bad tango dancers are not a threat to world peace. Besides, I'd rather be part of a huge thriving enthusiastic tango community with a few dancers that need to correct some bad habits, then an elite dwindling community of perfect dancers. Take your pick.

F. Instructional Videos. Yes, from videos you can inexpensively get instruction from the best tango dancers in the world. But here is the problem. Nearly everyone of these videos will teach you a tango pattern—but not the basics of comfortable embrace, musicality, lead/ follow and improvisation. So my recommendation is to use videos, but be aware of their limitations.

III. Cooperation: Maintaining harmony and cooperation in your community will be one of your most difficult challenges. Passions run high in the tango world, and nearly every community I've observed has infighting and dissonance. Your job will be to ignore the dissonance and encourage harmony.

A. Allow individuals to seek their level and niche of leadership and participation. In every tango community, various individuals will step forward and take on a myriad of different task that will help develop your community. Examples of these tasks are DJing, decorating, building a web site, offering their home to tango visitors, opening a tango studio, purchasing and sharing music, baking cookies, teaching, etc. Your job is to not only get out of the way when it happens, but to encourage it by asking for help and participation.

B. Don't prejudge. Many times I have prejudged a new beginner tango dancer in thinking that they will never be very good and will never infuse into the tango community; and I have been so wrong. A year or two later they have become pillars and important contributors to the community.

C. Encourage participation: A small example of this is that when I teach an absolute beginner's class, I bring in one or two extra CD's of tango music and ask my students if someone would be willing borrow them, make extra copies, and bring them back to the next class to share with everyone else. That saves me work and gets people into the idea of sharing and contributing.

D. Accept different styles of teaching and dancing. Although I have unequivocally stated above my own prejudices and belief in what and how tango should be taught and danced, because this is Argentine tango there will be widely different opinions on it. Just make room for everyone.

E. Accept and even encourage others who want to teach and/or become organizers and promoters. Frankly, this is probably going to be the most difficult thing for you to do. After struggling for years to develop your community, a newbie will step in and want to teach, or start their own milonga, or want to bring in and host a guest teacher on their own, or want

to organize a new tango festival/event of their own. Although it will hurt your pride and you will feel it's unfair, don't block it, don't just stand there, but step up to the plate and offer your help to that person. Remember, "**a rising tide floats all boats!**"

F. What about students that want to go off and teach for free? I say GREAT! These are your tango missionaries. These are your teachers in training. These are your volunteers who are willing to work for free. What could be better?

G. Accept splinter groups and "clicks" that naturally form. From time to time, small groups of tango dancers will want to go off and do their own thing (i.e., have their own party, milonga, outing, or whatever). I have seen some teachers and community leaders express not only discontent, but actually state that they feel these students were being divisive and splitting the community. Don't feel that way! This is exactly what should be happening. Encourage it and support it as part of the natural growth of the tango community.

H. Don't accept predatory or toxic behavior from individuals. This can be a difficult issue. Occasionally there will be an individual who has socially unfit behavior. When this happens, do not take it upon yourself to correct it. First discuss it with a few of your most trusted and respected comrades in the community and if, and only if, they agree with you, then take appropriate action by gently confronting the individual as a group and discuss the matter. Afterwards, carefully monitor that person's behavior and if it doesn't change, you may have to be more persistent. In a worse case scenario, shun them from the community-- however, be careful. No matter how awful an individual is, he or she will always have some allies and friends. Shunning or banning someone from the community will almost always cause some division/riff/split and/or controversy within your community..

I. Develop a local all inclusive web site. Developing and maintaining a web site is time consuming and takes a certain amount of expertise. If you're not familiar how to do this yourself, then find someone to create a very simple web page that you or someone in your community can update easily as information and the communities' tango calendar of events changes.

J. Develop and maintain an email list. An email list is a must for communication and notifying your community of upcoming events. Weekly or monthly you should send out a list or calendar of what's happening. If your list is small, you may want to maintain it yourself. If it is large (mine is over 5000), I'd suggest using an on-line company such as www.constantcontact.com to help you out.

K. Sharing your email list. Once you've worked very hard and put in a lot of time establishing your list, others will either (a) ask you to forward their own stuff to your list-- which you should do if it is pertinent and valuable to the tango community, or (b) they might even ask you if they can have your list--which will make you extremely angry at their impudence and audacity. Nevertheless, consider the possibility of emailing your own list with an explanation and contact information so that they can choose themselves if they want to be on someone else's list.

L. Include flyers and announcements from all groups at all events.