

Building a Successful Tango Community

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Three indicators of a successful tango community are its **quantity**, **quality** and **cooperative spirit**. Although many of them 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 to be considered a success. Your goal is to attract new dancers and keep existing dancers from dropping out.

A. Recruiting.

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

2. Teachers. The next tricky question is who should teach? The answer is...**you**, along with everyone of your friends, neighbors, and family. No one knows the least thing at all about tango! I know this is contrary to everything you’ve heard and thought about tango, but it’s the way it’s shared and taught by everyone. That’s the way it originated, and that’s the way it will promulgate. This is not rocket science. Everyone should have fun and enjoy. Remember, everyone of those people that your neighbor, relative, and clumsy former student started to dance with got into the tango community—and probably a body that would never have been there otherwise. Furthermore, once they’ve met 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 neighborhoods have a community service calendar in which you can place a short notice of your lessons, practicas and milongas. Depending on the city, neighborhood, and 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. You can’t perform—but that’s another bag and although a good performance will win a few converts, tango performances alone won’t build a community. In fact, it will mostly just attract egocentric dancers. If possible, the venue for a weekly milonga should be in a public place (coffee shop, etc). This is for two reasons. First, it introduces tango to the unsuspecting public. Second, people generally learn to dance 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 work. It takes time for good tango DJ’s to develop. In the meantime, do your best, educate yourself, and play what you think is good (see the next paragraph). Also, you must play tandas and cortinas (3 songs at most for beginners)—but not necessarily a tango.

3. Dancing Style. OK, you’re not all going to agree with me on this one. From many years of organizing tango festivals, attending other peoples tango communities and festivals, and from many visits to Buenos Aires, it is my belief and observation that in any tango community you must promote and develop a community that is absolutely, insanely and madly in love with dancing to the 1950’s golden age traditional music—not because that is what I love the most, but because it is the linkage between this music that makes tango so addictive. Furthermore, I base this claim on my experience as a former dance studio owner and ballroom dancer—none of which can compare nor compete with the emotional passion, connection, and exuberance of the close embrace tango.

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

II. Quality—developing good dancers

A. Weekend Festivals with Guest Teacher(s). Yes, but be careful! They can be expensive, exhausting, and time consuming.

the factors which affect these indicators

first job, then, is to get new people in,

holding classes are at community centers, existing client base, and will usually do assist their arms and do all your own (reference) are Friday, Tuesday, Thursday, tango events in your community, and for practicas.

neighbors, and acquaintances that but tango is a folk dance and should be surgery, my friend, and the idea is to arts teaching is one more body brought they see you dance and hear what a

od newspapers have a free public and location, putting up flyers on

unless, of course, all you want to do is e will not sustain a healthy tango e at a public place (restaurant, park, lly have a lot of pride and like to show

cut it. If your community is new, it will good tango dance music. (More on this at the practicas.

from many years of observing and servation that to have a successful close embrace tango to 30's, 40's and s style of dancing and this particular r and teacher of a dozen different one experiences from improvisational

d.

ming 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 community with bad teaching—not necessarily because they have bad teaching methods, but because they teach the B. 8-count basic (or more accurately, 8-step basic—since it's practically never 8 counts of the music). Unfortunately, many 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 thinking they know how to dance tango, (3) it doesn't encourage good lead and follow, (4) it stifles improvisation, (5) of the floor, (6) it's useless in a crowded milonga, (7) it stifles musicality, and (8) it's essentially never used by good so is it taught? The answer is laziness, ignorance, and tradition. (One of my favorite stories is about an excellent follower class in England. The teacher asked her to do the 8-count basic pattern alone without a partner. She answered that she 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, steps, walking outside your partner, crusada, side steps, etc. Being able to lead/follow these basic elements will enhance 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 tango communities (Portland, Ann Arbor, Atlanta, San Francisco, Denver, Seattle, etc), (b) check out the web sites of those 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. Consider this: (1) all of us learned some bad habits that we had to fix later, (2) all these students with bad habits will pick up 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 few dancers that need to correct come bad habits, than 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. Everyone of these videos will teach you a tango pattern—but not the basics of comfortable embrace, musicality, lead 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 and nearly every community I've observed has infighting and dissonance. Your job will be to ignore the dissonance and

A. Allow individuals to seek their level and niche of leadership and participation. In every tango community, various on a myriad of different tasks that will help develop your community. Examples of these tasks are DJing, decorating, buying tango visitors, opening a tango studio, purchasing and sharing music, baking cookies, teaching, etc. Your job is to not happen, 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 tango community; and I have been so wrong. A year or two later they have become pillars and important contributors.

C. Encourage participation: A small example of this is that when I teach an absolute beginner's class, I bring in one or more my students if someone would be willing to borrow them, make extra copies, and bring them back to the next class to share 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 what be taught and danced, because this is Argentine tango there will be widely different opinions on it. Just make room for

E. Accept and even encourage others who want to teach and/or become organizers and promoters. Frankly, this is probably the best thing for you to do. After struggling for years to develop your community, a newbie will step in and want to teach, or bring in and host a guest teacher on their own, or want to organize a new tango festival/event of their own. Although 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

F. What about students that want to go off and teach for free? I say GREAT! These are your tango missionaries. 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 have their own party, milonga, outing, or whatever). I have seen some teachers and community leaders express not only they feel these students were being divisive and splitting the community. Don't feel that way! This is exactly what should 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 whose behavior. When this happens, do not take it upon yourself to correct it. First discuss it with a few of your most trusted community and if, and only if, they agree with you, then take appropriate action by gently confronting the individual. Afterwards, carefully monitor that person's behavior and if it doesn't change, you may have to be more persistent. In the community—however, be careful. No matter how awful an individual is, he or she will always have some allies and support 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 familiar how to do this yourself, then find someone to create a very simple web page that you or someone in your community can provide information and the communities' tango calendar of events changes.

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mmunity can update easily as

J. Develop and maintain an email list. An email list is a must for communication and notifying your community of upcoming events. 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, you may want to use 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 add them to your list--which you should do if it is pertinent and valuable to the tango community, or (b) they might even ask you to share your list with them. This will make you extremely angry at their impudence and audacity. Nevertheless, consider the possibility of emailing your 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.

coming events. Weekly or monthly you
s large (mine is over 3000), I'd suggest

er (a) ask you to forward their own
sk you if they can have your list--which
ur own list with an explanation and