

2024 Angel Workshops

Most callers want to be the best teacher and dance leader they can be. We naturally fall into teaching the way we were taught. Unfortunately, the way we were taught, which was also the way our teachers were taught, doesn't necessarily work for what new dancers need to learn *today*.

Angels, people that come to square dance classes to help new dancers, can fall into the trap of teaching the way they were taught.

Successful Angels

The best angels and the best callers share a common trait; they both want to support the activity and help it grow. Callers that just want to be on stage and sting have short-lived careers. Angels that just want to "show new dancers how it is really done" cause more harm than help.

Memory and Learning

People, in general, think they have limited room in their long-term memories. This isn't true. The brain's information storage capacity is estimated to be about a quadrillion bytes. (A quadrillion is a 1 followed by 15 zeros—think of it as the number of dollars owned by a million billionaires.) This means that far more information can be stored in the brain than there are grains of sand on all the beaches and deserts of the world.

The real problem with memory isn't how much people can store. It's getting the information into or out of memory.

Working Memory vs Long-Term Memory

When we are first exposed to a new call, formation, or arrangement, it goes into our **working memory**. Working memory is temporary and volatile. (It acts like a crooked shelf. Place a ball of information on it and it will roll off when you let go.) Getting information from working memory to **long-term memory** takes effort. It is impossible to know when a working memory becomes a long-term memory.

Practice can improve working memory. However, that improvement tends to be small and inconsistent. The transformative effect of education involves long-term memory. As more knowledge is created/stored in long-term memory, the easier it is to add more. In pedagogy/andragogy, this is called the *Expertise Reversal Effect*.

For beginners, explicit guidance, step-by-step instructions, and detailed explanations are essential for understanding new concepts. These methods reduce cognitive load and help learners process new information effectively.

As learners become proficient, that detailed guidance that beginners require becomes redundant/distracting and leads to cognitive overload. Experts get more benefit from problem-solving opportunities, advanced tasks, and less structured learning environments that allow them to use their existing knowledge.

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Angel Guidelines

Recognize there is one teacher in the room and let them perform the job they were hired to do. It's possible to respect someone and their work without liking it.

Any talking in the square while dancing creates learning interference. *Read that again.* Side explanations/conversations are distracting at best and, at worst, prevent learning. The 5th Amendment contains several guarantees including the right to remain silent. While dancing—and especially while being an angel—respect the 5th Amendment.

People learn from their mistakes. Let the mistakes happen AND let people self-correct. **Pulling people through calls prevents learning.** Use non-verbal communication to guide. Squares that crash create teachable moments. Fixing squares that would otherwise fail creates the impression dancers are ready for more.

Respect the breaks between tips. It is tempting to *strike while the iron is hot*. While true in metallurgy, hitting people with hammers is call assault. The breaks between tips reset the brain's working memory. The harder the brain works during recall, the stronger the memory. Another way to say this: **In order to remember, the brain must first forget.**

Respect the breaks between tips, revisited. Practice is good. "Drill and kill" is bad. Instead, callers usually work on "drill and skill."

Respect breaks between tips, revisited again. In psychology, the Zeigarnik Effect describes how people tend to remember unfinished tasks better than completed ones. Respecting the breaks between tips keeps unfinished learning at the edge of working memory.

Everyone, students and angels, must dance their own dance. The best angels lead by example. It's okay to wait a couple of beats to let people figure out where they need to go.

If someone has a question, get the caller's attention and have them ask it. This goes back to letting them perform the job they were hired to do. If one person has a question, there's a strong likelihood at least one other person needs the answer.

Keep squares small. Large squares create longer promenades and expend extra energy. If dancers are getting tired, it's often square size.

Establish a dialog with the teacher. If you don't like something the caller said/did, **having a relationship in advance** makes discussions about such things easier. *When parents fight in front of their children, who wins?*

Focusing on the definitions of the calls is sub-optimal. Ask 10 dancers to define any given call, you'll get 10 different—but essentially correct—answers. A better tactic is to ask dancers to describe calls in their own words. (Off the dance floor.)