

BY RACHEL CASSANDRA ([HTTP://SOCIALDANCECOMMUNITY.COM/AUTHOR/RACHEL/](http://socialdancecommunity.com/author/rachel/)) /  
JANUARY 17, 2016

# RESOLVE TO MASTER YOUR LEARNING



Post Views 1,252

**R**eady to take your dancing to the next level?

It's the new year! Welcome to that time of fresh beginnings, new motivation, and rededication to goals you didn't quite accomplish in the previous year. This year you'll perform at a festival! Place in an advanced class! Get through a whole night without losing the beat! Take classes in forro or semba or pachanga or whatever other dance you've recently discovered!

Some of you are weary from past shortcomings, and may have declared that you don't believe in resolutions because you're doomed to fall short. Well, you're wrong!

Whoever you are, I invite you to believe that this year, you CAN achieve real progress in your dancing. Let me take you through several ideas that will help you master your learning.



### A. Get the most out of class

Attending weekly classes is the most obvious way of improving in a dance, so it's where most people start. There's so much you can do to make a difference in your class experience, though!

First, **make sure you take classes with a respectable teacher.** Billy Myles of

Kizomba Harmony wrote [an excellent in-depth guide](http://kizombaharmony.com/separatingthewheatfromthechaffpart1/) to finding a great teacher, but here's a few questions to consider. What's their claim to authority? Do they really know this dance form, or did they tack it onto their repertoire when the form got popular? Have they trained with someone reputable? For how long? How do other dancers in this form feel about this person? Do they have real teaching skills? Are their students able to dance well and chart their progress? Charles Ogar of Neo Kizomba recently drew attention to how [many people confuse performance expertise, social dancing skills, and quality teaching](http://neokizomba.com/aglanceatawcu/). There are no absolute ways to judge that someone is an awesome teacher, but asking these questions should set you on the right path.

Next, **consider your learning style.** Most of us learn through a combination of visual, auditory, tactile, and experiential inputs, but we also tend to connect faster to certain types of instruction better than others. Similarly, teachers should try to teach across all learning styles, but will tend to favor their own preferred learning style. Some of that is cognitive, and some of it is cultural – I wrote previously about the idea of [movement and non-movement culture learning](http://socialdancecommunity.com/bridging-the-divide-learning-to-dance-in-a-non-movement-culture/).

(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/bridging-the-divide-learning-to-dance-in-a-non-movement-culture/>). At the end of the day, it just makes sense to ask for what you need. Do you want to see the teacher dance it again? Would you like to have longer to practice the movement sequence? Do you need a verbal explanation of which muscle groups you should use or where the lead initiates from or how to follow through? Would you prefer to try it with music or with counts? Sure, you don't want to be a needy student who is constantly redirecting the class, but a good teacher wants to make sure you are really getting the material they are trying to communicate. I tell my students: "If

you feel like you want to ask, chances are someone else in the class does too, but is too shy – you may be helping more than just yourself!”



Personal engagement matters, too. Consistent attendance to class is another obvious point, but one with real value. If you really want to learn, make sure you set aside enough time to get to class on time every week that you can. Also, try to be analyzing the material you're presented with, comparing it to what you already know (in this dance or another) and considering how you can integrate it into your dancing socially. How many times have you gone to a class, then realized the next week that you remember none of it? Try to go beyond memorizing the steps so that you can bring new material to the social dance floor.

### **B. Work with your peers**

There is so much benefit to found in spending time with a practice partner or practice group. I often hear people complain that they can't find someone to practice with, but I think many times people create unnecessary obstacles.

No one into your dance in your town? Infect others with your addiction. Invite a teacher to come do a demo or taster class, or drag a friend to a class when you go to an out-of-town festival.

Can't find someone your level or better? Start working with someone at a lower level and help them catch up. They may surpass you if they're more dedicated, anyway!

Feel like everybody's already paired up? Ask about working in a small group.

Everyone gets better at leading and following when they work with multiple people.

Can't make things work on a regular schedule? Communicate regularly to find opportune times.

I have spent the last two years traveling a ridiculous amount with no partner, but I still make it a priority to take time with various people when I arrive in their cities. We go back and forth until we find a time and place we can meet and further our learning together.



So what should you do? A practice session is something between a class and a social dance. **You set the goal(s) for that time with your partner or group.** Maybe there are some technique drills you want to try repeating, like “wi-fi lead and follow” or “walking chest-to-chest only” or “turning down the line.”

Maybe you want to experiment with creating variations on moves you’ve already learned. Maybe you want to practice dancing to faster music, or slower music. Maybe there’s a combination you videoed in class that you want to perfect. Give each other constructive feedback as you go: “I couldn’t tell if you wanted \_\_ or \_\_.” “That time you were really grounded.” “Maybe if you curved your fingers more, it would help us stay connected.”

Whatever you’re working on, **I highly recommend recording yourselves** on video. You will find habits you never realized you had! Knowing the problem is the first step to fixing it, after all. Plus, you’ll more easily be able to measure your progress. A particularly useful trick is to watch yourselves dance with the video’s audio turned off. It’s easy to see if you are keeping a rhythm and moving fluidly together when there is no sound. Of course, to see how musical you are being, you’ll need to turn it back on to find the “hits” and other elements.



Best of all, **working with your peers forms wonderful bonds.** My practice partners have gone on to be people with whom I do everything from cooking dinner or going hiking, to talking about relationships and dreams, to performing at festivals and teaching

classes.

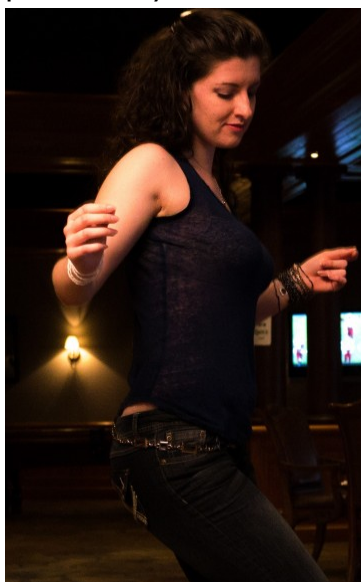
### C. Continue learning on your own

There are so many things you can do to improve your dancing all by yourself. One of the most important is to **listen to the music** appropriate to your dance. Listen to it in the car, on the bus, when you’re running, when you’re cleaning – the more it gets into your mind, the easier it becomes to dance musically. When you have time alone, set yourselves some challenges as you listen:

- tap the beat consistently
- walk to the beat
- find the rhythm of a particular percussive element, then tap it
- try stepping according to that rhythm
- try tapping two rhythms, one with each hand
- move your upper body to accentuate one rhythm as your feet follow the other
- follow the line of a single instrument or vocalist, then see if you can hum along

- move around the room, trying to embody that instrument or vocalist
- dance with an imaginary partner, choosing which parts of the music you want to focus on in your movement

Having great technique in a partner dance is usually founded on mastering certain things **by yourself**. Every dancer could stand to do more balance exercises. Many dances require immense practice in order to do controlled turns. I couldn't tell you the number of hours I spent back in 2011 in front of a mirror practicing salsa turns – literally hours every week. I spent a difficult hour at a tango festival trying to get through completely different turning exercises, and I know I need to devote many hours to walking around a chair if I'm ever going to make it through a milonga without embarrassment. Creating aesthetic arm shapes is another skill you can do alone in front of a mirror, particularly when it comes to smooth transitions between them. For kizomba, it took



me months of daily solo strain to loosen up my lower back and find the flow of undulations...and then it was time to work on all the other amazing things we ladies do with our pelvis! I could go on and on with examples, but any teacher worth their salt can give you some exercises for “homework.” It's up to you how much time you invest in them!

In the end, seeing real progress in your dancing is much more about making it enough of a priority to devote time to it than it is about any tips and tricks. Apply these ideas, but most of all, **put the time in!** That's the real key to mastering your learning.

---