

HOW TO TEACH CONSENT STARTING NOW (LESSON 1)



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There's growing momentum around the idea of fostering "consent culture" in our dance scene.

But what does that mean? And how can we teach that?

I have good news for you: it can start with two very easy lessons that will also help your dancers think about communication and creativity.

What is Consent? Why Does it Matter?

Consent doesn't mean just *not* saying "no."

In our dance scenes, there's a lot of places where we assume consent. If they allow themselves to be dragged onto the floor, if they don't push you away, if they say "thank you" and smile after the dance, we often assume everything went well.

When we have a culture that assumes rather than asks, or that passively accepts to avoid conflict or embarrassment, we can never be sure of how our partner feels. We may make someone uncomfortable or even injure them without ever having malicious intent. We may also find ourselves feeling trapped and unable to get out of an undesirable dance situation because of social pressure.

Consent is actively saying “yes” to something.

When it comes to dancing, that’s saying “yes” when you’re asked to dance. It’s closing the 10% into close embrace by wrapping your arm around your partner.

Sometimes it’s not clear whether someone is nonverbally saying “yes” or “no.” Rather than assuming a lack of refusal means a “yes,” practicing consent means that we either ask more clearly or assume that our partner would prefer something else.

I want consent to be part of our dance culture because that allows me to be certain that my partner wants to dance with me and is enthusiastically part of what we are creating together. I want to feel confident asking for a change or saying



“no” (<http://socialdancecommunity.com/what-it-means-when-they-say-no/>) to something that makes me feel uncomfortable. I love it when someone asks me and actually listens for my answer. Whether verbal or nonverbal, an enthusiastic “yes” is the best kind of yes!

How Can We Teach Consent?

I’m going to take you through two lesson plans that can work for anyone from beginners on up to experienced dancers that want to practice breaking some of these old patterns.

The first lesson focuses on changing holds or positions. This is such a fundamental part of partner dancing, but it often gets left out of any kind of conversation. It’s most often just left up to the leaders in Latin dances to decide what hold(s) the dance

will have. People assume that dancing kizomba or tango means that we will connect in close embrace. This lesson will challenge those defaults.

Start by introducing the idea of consent. Invite people to share some stories about times when actions without consent have made them uncomfortable or created problems. Ask about times when people have been unsure whether what they were doing or experiencing was okay. Then talk about how much confidence and joy you could find, knowing your partner is enthusiastically engaging in the dance with you.

Changing Holds

Now it's time for some practical exercises!

Divide the class into leaders and followers. If your community is one that has many people who change roles, then go through each exercises with people in one role, then allow people to choose roles again before repeating.

1. From Open Position to Closed Position

Depending on the level of the class, you might want to start by showing how these holds should look and feel in your dance.

Start with leaders in open position. Demonstrate how they can move into closed position by moving closer to the follower and then wrapping their right arm around the back. Emphasize that these are sequential rather than simultaneous.

For followers, show how they can affirm consent for closed position by lifting the left arm when the leader moves closer, making it easy for the leader to get the embrace, and then putting their left arm into position. Then demonstrate how they can instead maintain the open position distance by backing away as the leader moves forward.

Practice time! Leaders essentially ask for closed position nonverbally, and followers practice actively assenting or refusing. Change partners several times.

Then it's time to reverse the tasks. Show how followers can ask for closed position by moving closer to the leader with the left arm moving up towards the leader's arm or shoulder. Then demonstrate how leaders can assent by wrapping the right arm around or instead moving back as the follower approaches.

After everyone has tried asking and consenting or refusing, ask for people's feedback. "What feels natural? What is difficult? Did you notice when your partner didn't consent? Is this easier to do here than on the social floor? Why?"



2. From Closed Position to Close Embrace

The next round take us to close embrace, where your chest is in contact with your partner's. Close embrace can feel very intimate and isn't comfortable for everyone with every partner.

Show what close embrace should look like. Invite everyone to raise their hands if they like close embrace, if they don't, or if it depends on the partner. In most cases, the answers will vary widely. Now ask: "How can we make sure our partner is comfortable when we want to go into close embrace?"

Of course, this can always be done verbally. It's quite common at blues dances to hear someone ask, "How do you feel about close embrace?"

However, I also really like using the 90-10 rule, an adaptation of how the title character in the movie "Hitch" explains the right way to kiss a woman: to paraphrase, you close 90% of the distance, and hold until she (maybe) goes the final 10%.

Demonstrate this technique. Talk about how to pay attention to whether your partner tenses up and/or leans away or rather relaxes and closes the distance. Then have dancers of each role try being the initiator.

I like to start this exercise with followers asking for close embrace first. The followers move to within a few millimeters of the leader's chest and adjust their left arms (but loosely, not pulling the leader closer). Then it's up to the leader to consent by wrapping the right arm around appropriately, or to create distance again (whether by holding the frame and resisting the advance, or by going into another move).

After a few practice rounds with different partners, let the leaders try the 90-10 approach, with followers choosing to close the gap or use their frames to maintain distance.

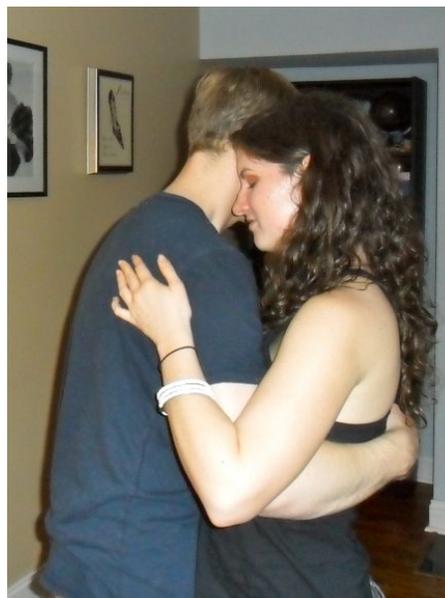
3. Moving Away

Of course, having once agreed to move into closed position or close embrace shouldn't mean being stuck there. Most leaders know how to move into another hold, but you can show beginners how to use their frame to create distance. A simple underarm turn that resets the open position is also a nice transition.

The technique for followers is simple: increase the tension in their backs and start to move away. For more experienced followers, you might consider showing them how to ask for an underarm turn or otherwise moving into something different.

Both sides require listening for the cues that indicate your partner would like something different.

This is a good opportunity for a mix-and-match exercise. After practicing each role asking to move away, invite everyone to try any combination of the three previous exercises, moving through different holds and positions.



4. Going into Breakaway or Shines

Whatever you call it, there's usually a moment in our partner dancing when we break physical contact. In a lot of dances, that moment is dictated either by an instrumental break in the music or by the leader sending the follower out into it.

The first time this happened to me was in salsa dancing and I hated it. For at least two months I dreaded the moment when the leader would let go and I would have to figure out something, anything to do, while my leader did some shines. Now, obviously I had to learn eventually, but there's no rule that says every salsa dance must include shines.

So what if we considered this another opportunity to practice consent?

Have the leaders initiate breakaway. Followers can accept and go into some sweet solo moves, or they can keep doing the basic step with the left arm still up, making meaningful eye contact with the leader. Leaders can then choose whether their creative idea must immediately be expressed, or if they might be just as happy to take the follower into hold once again.

Followers should also have the opportunity to ask for some solo space. There are so many points in the dance where this can happen, but I like to demonstrate at least one bad idea, like jumping back and away. and at least two good ideas, like letting go mid-turn and dancing away or initiating a rotation over the follower's right shoulder that allows you to roll off the leader's right arm.



Then of course it's up to the leader to agree and go into a shine or perhaps insist a bit on the frame – or even release into breakaway but stick to a basic step while asking for reconnection with a welcoming palm and intentional eye contact.

You can ask your dancers to practice this with one role going into breakaway at a time, but then also have a mix-and-match exercise. I like to build mine up: first, either partner can ask for breakaway and consent or refuse, then the other partner asks for the next hold change.

Wrapping Up

Talk to everyone about what this lesson meant for them. What new ideas do they have about two-way communication in their dance? How will they try to listen to their partner on the dance floor?

Come back to some of the stories from the beginning of class. What strategies could they use to address such situations?

These exercises can also give rise to creative ideas and the opportunity for them to be expressed. Empowering followers to be initiators means there's twice as many chances for something new to enter your dance. When one partner asks for a change in hold, the other will need to respond and adjust. If you are about to do something awesome in the current position, then the possibility is there to see it through, rather than being cut off by the need to make the position change – as long as your partner is listening and willing. If the dance seems to be stagnating as it currently stands, you can suggest a new connection or breakaway and offer space for something different to occur.

What about the second lesson? You can now find it [here](http://socialdancecommunity.com/teach-consent-2/)(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/teach-consent-2/>).

In the meantime, share your stories around consent! You can also check out more resources related to dancing and consent [here](http://www.kizombacommunity.com/services/consent-safety/)(<http://www.kizombacommunity.com/services/consent-safety/>).

