

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT



Marianka Swain seeks advice on mastering the art of practising

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“My general rule is five hours’ homework to every one hour of teaching,” says coach Melissa Elliot. “There’s no point coming back next session and just

repeating everything – that’s a waste of everyone’s time and money. Learning to dance is a process, and practising is a key part. Even pro dancers need to work on absorbing new information, physically and mentally.”

It can be a daunting prospect, observes teacher John Wilkes. “A lot of beginners feel overwhelmed – ‘Where do I begin?’ And tackling problems on your own can seem impossible. The key is identifying the elements you need to work on – it’s different for every single dancer.”

John suggests prioritising. “Rather than panicking about perfecting everything in a week, try to improve on just one thing. It might be posture, foot pressure, or listening to music and identifying the beats you’re matching movement to. If you find it hard to hear the

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THE BLAME GAME

“The most common question I get asked by dance partnerships is: ‘Who’s wrong?’” says Melissa. “The answer is ‘Both’ – you have equal responsibility and equal blame. In practice, it’s up to both of you to figure out how your contributions combine to create the step. Take it slow, break it down, watch each other, and be patient. If more of the problem lies on their side, be gracious about it. Shattering your partner’s confidence won’t help in the long run.”

‘one’, don’t worry – you’re not alone! Try clapping along to a song, isolating that one element.”

The same method applies to mastering a routine. “Don’t think about the big scary whole, and decide you’ll never get it. Break it down step by step, element by element. A tiny change like shifting your weight forward in Latin could make all the difference in connecting with your partner, which in turn makes a transition from one step to another easier, and then you’re at the races.”

But how do you improve on partner work when practising alone? “Actually, the best way to become a better partner is to become a more self-aware

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dancer,” believes teacher Karen Burns. “Practising alone is crucial. You can go at your own pace and work on strength, balance and control, so that when you come to dance with someone else, you’re receptive to their partnering, but not overly reliant on them. That’s especially true for followers, who might get hauled around the floor in class, but aren’t actually learning the figure properly for themselves.

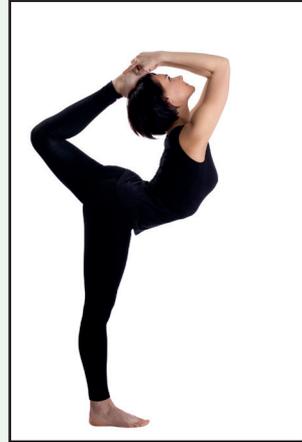
“If you learn as a couple, practise both together and

apart. Observe one another and be honest about what you need. It’s a bit like relationship counselling! Don’t be too judgemental or too polite. Give each other courage to confront the things that scare you, otherwise you won’t improve.”

YouTube is a great resource, says Melissa, but can be problematic. “Sometimes people pick up bad habits watching dance clips – that’s hugely frustrating, as you have to undo it all. Tape lessons or take notes to ensure you’re practising the right way.”

“Technique books are invaluable, though not everyone finds that the best way to learn,” observes John. “Dancing helps you figure out what kind of learner you are – do you respond when watching someone else, feeling the movement, writing it down or seeing diagrams? Visual learners could benefit from practising in front of a mirror; auditory learners can try repeating information out loud while dancing.”

“The most important thing is that practices are sacred because they’re yours,” says Karen. “Doing a good solo practice can be hugely empowering, and give you new confidence. You’re not in front of a class of strangers, so go big and experiment – dance like nobody’s watching!” ●



STUDENT TIPS

“The best thing my teacher told me was to practise in front of a mirror, so I could see what I really looked like! Once you’ve matched how it looks doing it right with how that feels in your body, it’s easier to replicate in class.” **Bill Graham**

“Work on linking steps together in different ways. Otherwise, you’ll get used to doing a set routine, and then a leader trying a different combo will completely throw you.”

Frannie Bedwell

“My teacher suggested adding bits of other disciplines to my practices – yoga and Pilates. That’s really helped with my strength and balance in dancing.” **Kayley Harris**

TEACHER TIPS

“Repetition is key. Getting it right once is a fluke; getting it wrong once is natural. Build steps gradually into your muscle memory.” **Melissa**

“Try not to ‘over-practice’ – you still want to respond to partners and the music. It’s a balancing act: building a strong foundation, but also being open to what happens in the moment.” **John**

“Take regular breaks. If you just can’t get something, chances are you’re tired, dehydrated or fighting a mental block. Have a breather, refuel, maybe work on something else for a bit, and you’ll be surprised how easy that impossible step seems when you come back to it.” **Karen**