

SalsAmigos Teen Dance Project: Introduction¹

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Sam Gill

SalsAmigos is a dance for teens. It has been created with specific human developmental goals in mind. It is based on a form of salsa dancing called *rueda de casino*. My name is Sam Gill. I am a Professor at the University of Colorado.² I began teaching dance to teens around 2003. Through my years of teaching teens I developed SalsAmigos dancing and the pedagogy that is so important to its successful teaching. My academic teaching and research include the study of dance traditions all over the world. Creating a new and powerful dance theory has also been a constant interest. I have incorporated much from my academic research in the development of SalsAmigos. In this Lecture Series I will consider SalsAmigos from a number of perspectives to show how amazingly powerful and fun this dance is. This presentation will introduce SalsAmigos dancing and show what distinguishes it. It will also outline some of the topics that will be covered in depth in other lecture presentations.

I have been teaching SalsAmigos to teens at New Vista High School in Boulder, Colorado, since 2003 and also in a youth afterschool program supported by the City of Boulder's Youth Opportunities Program. I have also taught many groups of youth and adults. I teach partner salsa dancing to dancers of all ages. One of the first groups I worked with became so accomplished that they entered international *rueda* competitions.

Rueda de Casino is a dance done in a circle comprised of male/female partnered pairs. It developed in Cuba around the middle of the twentieth century as a distinctive form of salsa dancing with historical roots running to Africa and Europe. The dance can now be found all over the world.

Similar to square dancing, associated with North American country music, *rueda de casino* has named moves called in Spanish. When a move is called all the dancers simultaneously execute the move. The signature moves involve exchanges of partners rotating around the *rueda*. The dance is improvised and controlled by the "caller." Moves are often called in rapid succession and many moves are intricate, complex, and long.

Rueda de Casino is a social dance with the dancers generally oriented to the center of the circle. Seeing one another around the circle the dancers energetically interact and the energy often builds along with the sense of community.

I was eager to develop *rueda de casino* for teens, because I recognized that it has such great potential to serve teen developmental needs such as physical exercise, appropriate and healthy touch, strong

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incentive to pay close attention, team work, mutual assistance, physical and mental coordination, and the building of self image and esteem. Yet, I recognized that some aspects of *rueda* dancing wouldn't work well with teens. And I also realized that I would need to develop special teaching methods for them.

Traditional *rueda* has strong gender identified roles. The lead is the male and the follow is the female. I knew that gender-identified roles were not appropriate for youth. I didn't want to support any social values that would suggest that males lead and females follow. I knew that to get equal numbers of boys and girls is very unlikely. I didn't want to have any role specialization at all, because that would mean the group would spend endless non-dancing time trying to match pairs. So the first major foundation of SalsAmigos dancing is that all dancers dance all positions and roles equally.

With all dancers dancing all roles equally, the next issue was how to avoid dancers even paying much attention to the distinctive roles of leading and following. I imagined that dancers should simply be able to dance and understand by relative position alone what they should do without consciously thinking: "I'm a lead" or "I'm a follow." This meant that dancers could not dance whole dances in one role and then switch to another for another dance. They needed to be able to switch roles smoothly on the fly without stopping. I recalled a move I had once learned that would accomplish this goal. It is called *confusion* and when called all dancers simultaneously switch roles. It can be called often during a dance.

The result of these changes allows all dancers to dance with everyone without concern for gender or role or specialization. The only requirement is a minimum of 4 dancers. In teaching all students always dance. If there are an odd number of students, the instructor teaches while dancing. The instruction is done by the teacher outside the circle when an even number is present.

I added another basic element to SalsAmigos dancing which has other wonderful effects on teen development. Dancing SalsAmigos, like *rueda*, the dancers orient to the center of the circle. This seems natural and helpful since the dancers can see one another and moving around the circle means moving along the secant on the inner side of the arc. However, teens love to perform and I began to realize that performances were difficult for audiences to appreciate because they are outside of the circle looking mostly at the backs of the dancers. The solution to this situation was to turn the circle to the outside. This can be done from inside to outside and back to inside with a simple called move. When the circle is turned to the outside, almost all the moves can still be done, but instead of going across the secant of the circle, now dancers must move in a larger arc path around the outside of the circle. Turned to the outside SalsAmigos presents well to an audience.

Although the motivation was audience presentation my pleasant surprise was the realization that this *afuera* or outside orientation provided even greater benefits for youth development. Not only do the dancers have the challenge of ambidextrous movements as leads and follows, but also in terms of orientation in space to both the inside and the outside. The impact on brain, body, and relationship development is amazing. Dancers are quickly able to move among these four orientations seamlessly.

Another SalsAmigos distinction is its pedagogy, the art and techniques of teaching this dancing. I believe that my experience as a teacher for over thirty years contributed extensively to my development of this part of the dance.

We almost always teach SalsAmigos dancing to groups of different ages, mixed levels of physical fitness and coordination, varying abilities to pay attention, and our groups often include youth with documented learning disabilities. SalsAmigos groups usually include youth who speak different languages and represent a variety of ethnicities. Consequently, how the dance is taught is critical to a successful experience for all involved.

Teaching SalsAmigos, as teaching any subject, is as much art as technique and good teaching requires careful training. Still, there are several principles that can be stated.

I believe there are amazing benefits to teens involved in SalsAmigos dancing. Yet, it is a solid rule in our teaching that we never even mention much less focus on, any aspect of these benefits. I will develop this principle much more fully in a later presentation, but I believe that one of the main reasons SalsAmigos dancing has such an impact on teens is that they participate because they just love to do it. It is fun. It is energetic. It is very social. It is noncompetitive and noncritical. We find that teens often acknowledge benefits they experience, but we focus all our attention on simply (and not so simply) teaching the dance.

The *rueda*, the circle, is in a way sacred. What I mean by this is that the circle as a form is inclusive and leveling and unifying. In teaching SalsAmigos it is important to always trust the power of the circle. Thus, in teaching SalsAmigos we rarely break the circle for any reason. We find that training or assisting teachers often have an inclination to break the circle. Commonly they want to give individual instruction to a teen that isn't getting it or to punish someone for not paying attention or acting inappropriately. They might think that a student who has missed one or more classes would disrupt the circle and offer to take that student aside to catch her or him up. We never allow this. The circle is always maintained and we have found from much experience that if this is honored most problems and issues are quickly resolved.

One of the greatest surprises I had when I started teaching high school kids was how amazingly capable they are and how eager they are to learn when challenged. I had heard so much about how difficult teens are to teach and, frankly, I dreaded even trying to teach them. I have found virtually all the hundreds of teens I have taught eager and excited to learn. However, I also have learned that success in teaching is tied to keeping the group always on the edge of their abilities. They must be constantly challenged, given positive creative stress, which keeps them always engaged and excited. To discern how to maintain this fine edge is where the art of teaching comes in, because pushing them too far, introducing material that is too difficult, demanding the accumulation of too many new moves and elements will simply shut them down. Yet, erring on the side of not being challenging enough usually results in students being quickly distracted.

I have to admit that I am amazed by the experiences I have had teaching SalsAmigos to teens. I never cease to be surprised and amazed by what I observe. There are so many stories. Surely one will do. There was a young man, quite tall, who took my class. He often entered the room a few minutes before class started. He put his hands behind his back and paced around the room with his head bent forward. Early in that term he seemed to remain apart from the rest and paced until time to dance. His participation was rather studied, but he was always eager and interested. Gradually as the term progressed he spent more time with the other students. By every indication I had he was fully present throughout the term and enjoyed the class. After the performance at the end of the term, I attended to the mandatory paperwork for the school. At that point I found that this student had a documented disability, He had a form of mild autism termed Asperger Syndrome. In this report I learned that this student was prone to disruptive behavior if confronted with too much pressure and stimulation. I was given strategies to deal with the student should it be necessary. I was greatly pleased that these hadn't been necessary, and I marveled at the outcome. This student had been subjected to loud music, constantly called instructions, students constantly touching him, students talking and laughing while dancing, and the pressure to remember a great many moves to be executed on demand. I recalled that by the end of the term this student was hanging with the others and that he even played an active role in creating performance choreography. I believe that SalsAmigos dancing "normalized" this student, allowing him to socialize and connect with others and to be a part of the circle with the gentle assistance of others.

In the presentations to follow I will carefully discuss a number of important areas where I believe SalsAmigos serves youth. Each topic will include some academic research to set the context. Then provide detailed analysis of what SalsAmigos does to contribute to human development. Let me tell you a bit of what is to come.

The increase in bullying, physical violence, and sexual assault among peers as well as between teachers and students has led many schools to severely restrict touch of any kind. While such measures are likely necessary to protect our young people, an unfortunate byproduct is that most students never experience touch of any kind.

Dr. James Prescott, a developmental neurophysiologist at the National Institute of child Health and Human Development wrote, "I believe that the deprivation of body touch, contact, and movement are the basic causes of a number of emotional disturbances which include depressive and autistic behaviors, hyperactivity, sexual aberrations, drug abuse, violence, and aggression."

The lack of healthy and appropriate touching may contribute to the very conditions that have led to the increased prohibition of touch.

Clearly what is needed is an environment where students and teachers may come into physical contact with one another that is healthy and appropriate and safe. There is abundant scientific evidence that touching is fundamental to healthy human development.

SalsAmigos dancing requires dancers to physically touch one another. Touching is always functional and visible. It is necessary to do the dance. We never talk of touch; we never warn against inappropriate touch. Yet, SalsAmigos dancers learn to communicate enormous amounts of information among one another through the medium of touch. One of my lectures will be on touch.

Another lecture will discuss a wonderful concept of teamwork or what might better be called teamplay.

Team and team work are common ideas that are presented to teens in a variety of settings. Sports is surely the most common setting followed by other competitive activities such as debate. This common concept of team usually depends on external goals to provide motivation for team development and it gives identity to the team. Thus for youth, team almost invariably means, competition with the incumbent identification of good team with winner and bad team with loser.

There are other concepts of team and SalsAmigos offers an important one. While SalsAmigos doesn't talk to dancers about team or team work, they quickly begin to understand and embody an important type of team concept.

An important physical part of SalsAmigos dancing involves what we would term "back leading." This is when one dancer who is in a follow role determines, usually through touch, that her or his partner may not know the move that has just been called. If this person knows the move, he or she will take the lead as a follow, that is, back leading the lead through the move. This is done almost always without comment or any statements of criticism. Why is it done? Simply to keep the circle going and the dance moving. A breakdown would disrupt the flow in the circle, so back leading is done to support the goal of the whole group. Students become adept at back leading and giving lost dancers a little assistance usually done with a small touching assist.

I almost never hear any student criticize another and yet I often hear the dancer who is helped thank the other for helping out.

This concept of team is distinguished by the goal being intrinsic, not extrinsic; it is non-competitive; it is inclusive; it is accomplished without being given any attention at all.

One of the foundational issues of all humanity, escalated in the present world, is managing human differences. Those unlike us seem always to be either much more valuable and important than us or much less. Tolerance and acceptance and appreciating differences are fundamental responsibilities of the education of youth. Arguably this cannot be done simply by beseeching our youth to tolerate one another. Actual tolerance must come from communication and contact. Verbal communication has its own limitations since we do not all speak the same language or a single language equally. Most arenas for non-verbal communication are characterized by competition and even violence.

What is needed is an arena for young people to come into close contact with one another with a common goal such as mutual enjoyment, even if it is a requirement for a school course. SalsAmigos serves this need very well. A dance group often includes students from several ethnic backgrounds including often foreign exchange students, different social status (I'm thinking popularity here), different

types of personality, and different gender-role identities. In high school even the difference between freshmen and seniors is in most school arenas almost unbridgeable.

SalsAmigos dancers dance with all others which requires touch, cooperation, connection, and mutual orientation and goals. We have often heard dancers comment on how they not only simply meet, but make a connection with, students they would never even know to exist outside the dance.

We have also experienced that students with documented disabilities such as ADD or slow mental or physical processing do very well dancing SalsAmigos. They are carried along with the circle.

I have become highly interested in recent neurophysiological and cognitive scientific research. Recent research shows that the brain remains plastic, that is, changeable, throughout life, in contrast to the common understanding that physical brain development is complete by age eight to ten. More importantly research documents that teen brains undergo several periods of rapid expansion, or exuberance, followed by a rapid trimming down finally to the adult brain.

The question that scientists have yet to conclusively answer is what environmental activities best stimulate healthy brain development during these periods of exuberance. While we await the more conclusive results for this issue, it is clear that physical exercise is important to increase blood flow to the developing brain. It is clear that demanding stimulus/response that produces creative stress is important. It is clear that brain functioning is certainly not isolated from body movement and directed action. It is clear that touch and physical activities that hone balance and bodily self-awareness are important to brain development.

SalsAmigos provides all these nourishing factors to developing teen brains. I will devote a lecture to this topic.

Recent research has begun to build a powerful case that human meaning-making is not solely a function of cognitive, word-based, rational, conceptual thought. Rather, all our meaning is grounded in sensorimotor patterns and schemas that are created through the way we move our bodies in both repeated patterns common to all humans as well as repeated patterns that coincide with cultural practice.

This means that we discover ourselves and our worlds through movement. Our posture and the way we move reflect and affect our self image. The role of movement in human development will be a lecture topic.

The absence of interaction with others through movement, the absence of patterned movement forms that provide a sense of self-image, the absence of associating communal and relational values with movement all lead to the stunting of personal development, to unhealthy self-images, lack of confidence, and low self-esteem.

In the highly repetitious patterns of physical movement provided in SalsAmigos dancing one can literally see students stand up, smile, interact, and exude self-confidence.

Youth of today are often overweight, unhealthy, out of shape, deprived of sleep, and stressed. I am amazed at how much less stamina teen dancers have than I have though they are a fifth my age.

SalsAmigos dancing requires about 6,000 steps an hour which is equivalent to briskly walking a mile and a half. My classes are usually either one or two hours long which amounts to a good bit of physical exercise several times a week. Of course we never ever would talk about SalsAmigos dancing as exercise, although students often recognize that they are exercising. Most report that they are more alert throughout the days they dance. Most significantly increase their physical agility and physical self-awareness through the course. Most of the dancers work up a sweat while dancing.

There are obviously a great many benefits to regular physical exercise. I'll discuss this topic in a lecture.

These are some of the topics I will cover in this lecture series. The lectures are based on my academic research and my extensive experience working with young people. Each lecture in the series will cover an important, and often controversial, topic related to teen development. While I will focus on SalsAmigos as a dance or movement form that serves important needs, many other movement forms may meet the same needs in somewhat different ways. SalsAmigos dancing will be the standard example for my presentations and, of course, I hope that many will find it compelling to begin to include SalsAmigos dancing in school curricula, in after school youth programs, and in other programs serving young people. However all of what I will present in these lectures will hopefully inspire the development of other forms and activities that will serve the development of healthy and happy young people.